

The V&A, The Destruction of the Country House and the Creation of 'English Heritage'

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Abstract

This paper considers the role played by the V&A and the exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House* in the political activities and increasing prominence of the 'heritage lobby' in England in the 1970s. It argues that the V&A had a significant role in shaping the discourse and advancing the public awareness and political efficacy of the heritage movement, and that it assisted in reinforcing the association of, and perhaps even conflating, English heritage with the country house. The paper also reflects on changing attitudes and policy relating to heritage in England since the late twentieth century, drawing on a range of relevant critical literature and theoretical approaches.

Key Words: V&A, Heritage, Country Houses, Policy, England

Introduction

In the autumn of 1974, the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (V&A) staged an exhibition called *The Destruction of the Country House* (hereafter called *Destruction*). Although not, as the Museum's then director Roy Strong was later to claim, 'the first time [...] that a museum exhibition was an exercise in polemic' (1998: 139), it was a landmark show for the V&A, and a watershed in heritage politics. The exhibition promoted the idea that not only were England's great country houses under threat, but that if these richly symbolic buildings were lost, so too would be important aspects of English national history, culture and identity. This conflation and the exhibition as a whole are important for an understanding of the recent history of heritage in the UK because the V&A, its policies and personnel, played a key role in shaping the discourse and advancing the public awareness and political efficacy of the heritage movement. By reinforcing an association between English heritage and the country house, the V&A contributed to the making of a case for the preservation of the latter, and helped transform the architectural heritage of the aristocracy from a minority interest to a cause with significant popular appeal and support.

Literature Review: 'The Heritage Industry Critique' and its Critics

The politics of heritage have been debated in a growing body of (largely left-leaning) literature that explores the conceptual frameworks and agendas underpinning an apparently increasing emphasis on heritage in British culture. An early key text was Patrick Wright's *On Living In An Old Country*, first published in 1985, a series of essays which sought 'to clarify some of the ways in which the past has been secured as a cultural presence in modern Britain, [...] and] also try to follow this political development and to identify some of its more important preconditions' (Wright 2009: 3). Robert Hewison's more populist and polemical *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* followed in 1987; this claimed that the past was beginning to 'loom above the present and darken the paths to the future' (1987: 31), and that Britain had been reduced to a theme-park shadow of its former self, its history sanitized and commodified, nourished by a conservative and reactionary ideology. The idea that heritage was 'right-wing' was taken up by journalists such as Neal Ascherson in *The Observer*, who alleged that the 'heritage industry'

imposed a 'one-sided, middle-class, deeply conservative view of the past upon British society' (1987: 9). This 'heritage industry critique' was itself subject to denunciation, most notably by Raphael Samuel in *Theatres of Memory* (1994). Although sympathetic to aspects of their arguments, he characterised Wright, Hewison and Ascherson as 'heritage-baiters', whose standpoint was rooted in a 'metropolitan, literary snobbery' (Wright 2009: xvi), conservative too in its way. Their approach, claimed Samuel, dismissed democratic and proletarian modes of engagement, forsaking historical rigour for the theoretical flourishes of Cultural Studies. 'Behind the critique of heritage', Samuel (1994: 264-5) asserted,

...lies residues of that conspiracy theory according to which historical change is engineered by ruling elites, and popular taste is at the mercy of what 1960s and 1970s radicals took to calling the manipulations of 'the media'. [...] In Britain, [...] 'heritage' was said to represent a kind of return of the repressed, a victory of feudal reaction. It was a 'project' or 'strategy' (so radical critics alleged) undertaken on behalf of the wealthy, the privileged and the powerful, and actively promoted by the ruling elites. It deployed a dominant form of 'Englishness', played with reactionary fantasies, and threatened to make the country-house version of the national past [...] hegemonic.

However, while Samuel's complaint that this mode of analysis of heritage politics lacks universal applicability is legitimate, it is nonetheless, I contend, a fairly accurate summation of the country house lobby's activities in the late twentieth century.

An argument advanced by a number of writers is that 'heritage', although constituted of the built environment, landscape, material culture, memory, etc., is not an objective category; rather it is a relative, almost arbitrary construct, deployed in the pursuit of particular political, ideological and aesthetic agendas. Lowenthal (1998: xv) proposes that 'heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes', while McDowell (2008: 43) observes:

Heritage is a highly politicized process that is subject to contestation and bound up in the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of memory and identity [...] Memory always represents a struggle over power and is thus implicated in the 'who decides?' questions about the future.

An important role of advocates of heritage is to reconceptualize certain artefacts, buildings and landscapes as 'treasures' and hence worth 'saving', often for the benefit of 'the nation'. Deckha (2004: 404 emphasis in original) observes that conservation 'produces rather than reflects heritage' and, as Laurajane Smith (2006: 3) asserts;

Heritage is heritage because it is subjected to the management and preservation/conservation process, not because it simply 'is'. This process does not just 'find' sites and places to manage and protect. It is itself a constitutive cultural process that identifies those things and places that can be given meaning and value as 'heritage', reflecting contemporary cultural and social values, debates and aspirations.

Smith further proposes that meaning and value are articulated through what she calls the hegemonic 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD), which

...focuses attention on aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/ or landscapes that current generations 'must' care for, protect and revere so that they may be passed on to nebulous future generations for their 'education', and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past. (Smith 2006: 30)

Although this does not entirely discount the possibility of dissenting or subaltern discourses these are, by definition, overshadowed by dominant narratives. The AHD reflects the

...social and cultural experiences of the [male] European educated upper middle and ruling classes, who dominated the professional groups that championed and concerned themselves with the preservation of historical monuments. (Smith 2008: 162)

Perhaps because it was a concept tacitly agreed upon by a powerful social fraction, 'heritage' has never been clearly defined, despite being enshrined in public policy discourse. As Hewison (1987: 136-7) notes:

The first annual report of the National Heritage Memorial fund, for 1980-81 confronted the absence of any definition in the Act of Parliament that had set it up, and concluded that the question of definition was unanswerable:

We could no more define the national heritage than we could define, say, beauty or art. [...] So we decided to let the national heritage define itself. We awaited requests for assistance from those who believed they had a part of the national heritage worth saving. ...

The national heritage of this country is remarkably broad and rich. [...] But this national heritage is constantly under threat.

'Threat' is not only a ubiquitous trope of heritage discourse, but a defining characteristic. Hewison (1997: 193) suggests that 'powerful symbols' such as the country house 'appear most significant when they are most "in danger"', while Wright (1985: 73) asserts:

Given an entropic view of history, it is axiomatic that 'heritage' should be in danger. To the extent that threat defines the heritage as valuable in the first place the struggle to 'save' it can only be a losing battle. The 'stewards' struggle valiantly on behalf of their trust, but a barbarian indifference is all around. It is against this indifference that the urgent tone of the parliamentary conservationist tends to be directed: "legislation designed to preserve the best of the past has often come too late".

Thus, by definition, all 'heritage' has either been 'saved', or is in need of 'saving'.

Graham and Howard (2008: 5) argue that because heritage 'can be envisaged as a knowledge, simultaneously a cultural product and a political resource' it is vital that critical questions are asked of it. These questions should include, they suggest: 'why is a particular interpretation of heritage being promoted? Whose interests are being advanced or retarded? In what kind of milieu was that interpretation conceived and communicated?' (Graham and Howard 2008: 5). This paper, then, sets out to answer these questions, and explore the creation of a particular historical narrative in the context of the activities of the country house lobby in Britain in the 1970s and, in particular, those in which the V&A had a direct involvement and influence.

History of the Heritage Movement and Country House Lobby

The idea that country houses represented 'heritage' in the sense of some abstract good and, consequently, were in need of rescue came late in their history. Certainly they were not initially a priority of the conservation movement. When the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was established in 1877, and the National Trust in 1895, they focused on church architecture and the countryside respectively. Despite the fact that the late nineteenth century witnessed a severe downturn in the fortunes of the landed classes, and even though these organizations were 'wholly embedded within educated, privileged and influential circles' and had 'strong connections to a range of enlightened aristocrats' (Harvey 2008: 27), neither showed much interest in country houses. These became central to the National Trust's activities only after 1937 when a change in the law allowed ownership of country houses to be transferred to the Trust with former owners remaining as tenants.

Shared class backgrounds eased the transfer of ownership. In the years following WWII the Trust was run almost entirely by Old Etonians, and consequently:

The great houses of England were brought into public ownership by confident delegation, by mild nepotism, ... by leaning on the great and the good,' [as] The Times put it. 'This was the old-boy network's finest hour ... the noblest

nationalization.' It worked because 'Trust officials were manifestly of the same class and stock' as the donors: 'The aristocracy of England yielded up its finest possessions ... into the care of like-minded guardians. ... They shared assumptions, friends, even families. (Lowenthal 1998: 65-6)

Public access to houses administered by the National Trust was 'in some instances fixed at no more than 50 days in the year and at hours which were, as the Trust freely admitted in 1947, "settled as far as possible to suit the donor's convenience"' (Kynaston 2007: 175).

The Gowers Report

The postwar fortunes of the country house fluctuated with the economic and political climate. In 1948, the Labour Government appointed a committee led by Sir Ernest Gowers:

To consider and report what general arrangements might be made by the Government for the preservation, maintenance and use of houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest which might otherwise not be preserved, including, where desirable, the preservation of a house and its contents as an entity. (Delafons 1997: 68)

Concerned it might be made redundant by the Ministry of Works, which administered a number of publicly-owned, non-resident estates, often as public museums or leisure facilities,

The [National] Trust claimed for itself the distinctive task of holding houses still inhabited by their families but supported by the State. (Mandler 1997: 342)

For their preservation to be assured, the Gowers Committee urged that the 'way of life', that is of the residents of country houses, must also be maintained, by means of tax exemptions and even grants if necessary. In return, the public would enjoy the benefits of a preserved heritage, often with rights of access for educational or touristic purposes. Although the Labour government were not particularly pleased by the Committee's potentially costly recommendations, and the Conservative government that succeeded them in 1951 even less so, the issue resolved itself somewhat when the economy began to improve in the 1950s and 1960s, and increasing affluence meant owners were again able to live in large properties, some of which had been empty for generations.

The Stately Home

Some landed families broke with gentlemanly norms and approached their houses as business propositions, supported by Country Life which asserted that 'the attitude which condemned the owners of Woburn and Beaulieu for commercialism must be cast aside' (Strong 1999: 188). The synonym Stately Homes was increasingly used, and signified, suggests Cannadine (1992: 647), 'a major transformation' from private to public; 'A country house, sequestered and secluded, was one thing; a stately home, open to the paying public, was quite another'.

However, a combination of inflation, the energy crisis and higher taxation meant that, from the late 1960s, numerous landed estates once again became an unsustainable burden for their owners. This issue came to prominence in 1969 when, until rescued by government intervention, the future of Heveningham Hall in Suffolk looked in peril. John Baring, Baron Ashburton's attempt to demolish The Grange, a huge Hampshire pile, in 1972 attracted controversy and although Baring had obtained permission from the Ancient Monuments Commission, he recalled:

"One of the preservation societies weighed in and I was much censured. People wrote extremely rude letters to The Times about me". [He was] Nicknamed 'Basher Baring' by the press and asked to desist by the government... (Campbell 2007)

This was indicative of shifting attitudes because, throughout the twentieth century, many houses were demolished unnoticed and unmourned because they were considered to be 'white elephants' or even, according to prevailing tastes, 'monstrosities'. Prior to the late 1960s not

even enthusiasts of the built environment advocated preservation as a matter of course. A touring exhibition of 1964 called *Vanishing History*, designed by the V&A at the behest of the Standing Conference for Local History, intended merely 'to draw public attention to the need for the recording of old buildings due for demolition' (Munby 1963: 197, my emphasis). However, once the issue was on the public agenda and capable of attracting sympathy, the country house lobby took the opportunity to advance their cause. An important element in the success of this was country house owners themselves presenting a public and relatively united front – something to which many had proved resistant in the past.

Mandler suggests that the owners' willingness to engage directly, as a group, in the debate on the future of their homes was aided by the increasing numbers of houses open to the public, with owners now 'accustomed to a public role as custodians of heritage' (Mandler 1997: 402). The Historic Houses Association was thus, to this end, founded as an autonomous body in November 1973, having begun in 1965 as a committee organized by the British Travel Association.¹ One of the roles of this new association was to inculcate in the public a sense of the importance of the country house in English history and culture. This was necessary, Mandler (1997: 400) argues, because in the course of their leisure activities people

...had come to accept privately owned stately homes as places of entertainment and relaxation, to some extent as art treasures of national importance, but not yet as some higher, more abstract good requiring special protection independent of use-value.

In 1972 the Historic Houses Association commissioned John Cornforth, Architectural Editor of *Country Life*, to undertake an extensive survey, eventually titled *Country Houses in Britain: Can They Survive?* 'A considerable number of historic house owners [...] contributed to the cost of the Study',² with publication costs covered by the British Tourist Authority. This 'wholly independent'³ report was to provide heritage campaigners with a firm empirical foundation on which to base their, often emotive, arguments.

The Wealth Tax

In 1974, the country house lobby was given a significant impetus by the Wilson Labour Government's proposal of a Wealth Tax. Plans were outlined to replace death duties with a Capital Transfer Tax (CTT), which would tax the transfer of capital assets regardless of whether they were made during the owner's lifetime or after death, closing a significant loophole for estate holders. In addition, tax relief on agricultural land and works of art was to be scrapped, unless the latter were on public display. Many in the heritage movement feared that houses and their contents would be broken up and sold or even destroyed to meet these new tax demands, and the (minority) Government found themselves facing trenchant opposition. Strong (1998: 141) wrote to a friend in the spring of 1974 that:

The threatened Wealth and Inheritance Taxes if applied to historic house owners will see... the end of a thousand years of English history and culture, as pell-mell the contents are unloaded into the saleroom, the houses handed over to the Government or demolished. I can't tell you the horrors looming unless one fights and intrigues at every level behind the scenes.

In the summer of that year a protest organization, *Heritage in Danger*, was established by the Conservative MP Patrick Cormack and the art dealer Hugh Leggatt, 'around whose "ample luncheon table" the campaign against the wealth tax was co-ordinated' (Hewison 1987: 67). This group was largely composed of Tories and their sympathizers, but also included a number of 'Socialist aesthetes'. The parliamentary committee appointed to examine the tax proposals heard evidence against them from numerous organizations and individuals. Lord Goodman submitted the findings of *Heritage in Danger*, while submissions were also made by the Country Landowners' Association, the Historic Houses Association, the Museums Association, the Tate Gallery, the British Museum, the Historic Buildings Council, the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, the British Tourist Authority, the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art, the National Art Collections Fund and the Antique Dealers' Association.

The Destruction of the Country House

The V&A exhibition, *Destruction*, which ran from October to December 1974 appeared to be an implicit response to the tax proposals. Conceived as a 'a fanfare'⁴ to the 1975 European Architectural Heritage Year, it made the case for the preservation of the stately home but, in an exhibition context, 'more vividly, in an historical perspective, and to a wider audience' (Mandler 1997: 404). To the more cynical observer, however, it appeared to be 'a covert piece of propaganda against the wealth tax and a lament for the disappearance of a genteel way of life' (Hewison 1997: 193). In fact, the propaganda was not terribly 'covert' and it was perhaps this, as well as the incursion of 'outside interests' that explain why it was 'quite a battle' (Strong 1998: 139) to get the show staged.⁵ The V&A at that time was administered by the Ministry of Education and Hewison reports that although Hugh Jenkins, the Minister for Arts, was able to insist that Strong, as a civil servant, resign from *Heritage in Danger*, he could not prevent him from mounting the exhibition.

That the show might generate hostile responses was something Strong was keenly aware of and, consequently, he placed a press embargo on the (privately funded) opening night dinner; 'I feared the newspapers caricaturing rich country-house owners quaffing champagne while the Museum pleaded their cause' (1998: 140). In the context of a severe recession the priorities of the heritage lobby appeared to many to be at best misplaced, at worst special pleading by an already privileged elite. David Eversley, Chief Strategic Planner for the Greater London Council in a 1974 article, 'Conservation for the Minority?', observed that:

One rapid glance at the composition of the official bodies which can prevent any change by their edicts, the unofficial pressure groups which back them, the leading individual writers who monopolise the subject in the press, all show us who they are: the ever-present establishment, the landed aristocracy, the products of Oxford and Cambridge, the landowners, the officer class, and, behind them, their hangers-on: the trendy academics with less pretensions to gentility who prove their club-worthiness by espousing their elitist views. (Quoted in Strong 1999: 202)

Looking back on this in 1997, Strong (1999: 202) was forced to admit that 'Embittered though Eversley's viewpoint might have sounded, it was one which deserved answering'. In 1974 however, Strong's loyalties appeared less divided and it is likely Eversley would have counted him amongst the 'trendy academics'. Although from quite humble social origins – he claimed to be the first Director of the V&A without a private income (Strong 1998: 134) – Strong was socially and culturally aspirant. Initially he struggled; writing a doctorate on Elizabethan art he says he was 'faced with writing to the aristocracy and visiting country houses. You had to learn all that game. Making the right conversation. The humiliations were numberless' (quoted in Tyrrel 2004). They paid off, however, and his career at the National Portrait Gallery (1959-73), combined with tireless networking, provided Strong with many friends and allies amongst the landed classes and numerous opportunities to enjoy their hospitality. Reflecting upon 1973, he wrote:

Country-house weekends and lavish entertaining continued almost unabated, but in truth we were living a mirage, for 1973 was in fact the last year of the 1960s. I sensed that pall of gloom as the economic and political crisis intensified. (Strong 1998: 121)

The 'we' in this sentence is telling, and makes his social and political allegiances explicit, but Strong (1998: 121) also had a scholar's love of his subject and we might assume he was sincere in his claim that:

One of the burning reasons for wanting to direct the V&A was the passionate belief that a huge threat was on the horizon for everything that we now categorise as 'heritage', and that that museum under my directorship could play a crucial role as a vehicle in its defence.

Strong also saw *Destruction* as a means to augment his reputation as a daring and radical

museum director. As is evident from correspondence in the V&A's archives, most notably with Lady Dartmouth, Chair of the Executive of European Architectural Heritage Year, he had already conceived of the exhibition and was taking steps to bring it to fruition prior to taking up his post officially as Director of the V&A. Strong intended that it should be an 'explosive', 'exciting', 'provocative and controversial exhibition,' 'dramatic and hard hitting'.⁶

The exhibition was a 'multi-media' affair, using paintings, photographs, furniture and furnishings together with audio-visual elements to make its case. While the cultural significance of country houses was the dominant theme, the show also emphasized their role in local communities and wider society. The explanatory panels in the exhibition portrayed country estates as the 'best' of English society in microcosm and as models of a self-sufficient communitarianism:

Everyone who lived and worked there depended on everyone else, and in times which were full of hardship and deprivation it usually brought a higher degree of security and a better standard of living than was available outside. This sense of community was the life-blood of the house, and despite all the changes of the last 100 years much remains of the loyalty and dedication it inspired. Indeed it is the main reason why most houses are still in good condition.⁷

However, such solidarity could only be assured within a hierarchical society in which everyone 'knew their place'. While acknowledging that the servants who maintained such estates often worked long hours and in harsh conditions, the exhibition also stressed that;

...behind the green baize door was a world with its own elaborate rules and privileges, rewards and friendships. As servants worked their way up the household they too had the luxury of being waited on. Looking back the work may seem menial but it involved a high degree of skill and most houses were looked after with a pride and zeal which gave satisfaction to all.⁸

Although Strong claimed that the intention was to produce 'an utterly objective presentation, to put before the public every aspect of a problem central to our cultural heritage',⁹ in fact the exhibition was deliberately staged to wring an emotional reaction from visitors, perhaps reflecting the 'passion' (Strong 1999: 141) with which it was produced. The centrepiece of the exhibition suite was the 'Hall of Lost Houses', a dramatic environment produced by designer Robin Wade which resembled a neo-Classical portico crumbling under the impact of a wrecker's ball. On each piece of 'falling' masonry was a photograph of one of the thousand or so country houses destroyed during the twentieth century, while in the background a tape played sounds of burning timbers and collapsing buildings with the voice of John Harris reading the names of lost seats 'like a litany' (Strong 1998: 140). Strong (1998: 141) recalls that:

The impact on the public was overwhelming, for they alighted upon it turning a corner, having been wafted along by an opening section on country-house glories. And then they came face to face with this. Many was the time I stood in that exhibition watching the tears stream down the visitors' faces as they battled to come to terms with all that had gone.

Such an emotive response proved effective, as Strong's account suggests, but also controversial and divisive. John Harris, in a memo to Peter Thornton, Keeper of the Department of Furniture and Woodwork and one of the co-organisers of the show, reflected on 'the political implications of this exhibition.' They could not afford, he urged,

...to convey an impression (false or otherwise) that we are advocating the return to a way of life that is now defunct and unacceptable. [...] It would therefore be political dynamite to open our exhibition with the 'Arcadian Vision', for the contrast between this section, [...] and the 'Destruction' section [...] would produce precisely this unwanted interpretation. It would be better to open the exhibition with a display of photographs on the theme 'Going, going, gone', i.e. the situation at the moment with derelict and threatened houses: [...] Then we can pass through Wade's 'smashing' wall.¹⁰

Although no response to Harris's memo is included in the archive, evidently his caution was not heeded. A thundering editorial in *The Observer* described *Destruction* as 'the most emotive, propagandist exhibition ever to grace a public museum's walls'. It took exception to the rather loaded text which 'abounds in phrases such as "the disrespectful boots of the building contractors," [and] houses "wantonly broken up" in an attempt 'to do for the privileged what Chairman Mao did for the people' ('Demolition' 1974). Indeed, many of the exhibition's wall panels addressed the visitor directly, leaving them in no doubt of their part in the present crisis:

Taxation has broken up the estates which supported them. It has forced the disposal of the contents they were built to house. It has made the gardens around them unmanageable. Above all, they have gone because the nation as a whole was asleep to their beauty. When their owners decided they were ugly or out-moded no one stood up to contradict them. They have gone because politicians have not been moved to do anything positive to preserve them.¹¹

Another was even more explicitly accusatory:

In modern times no other country has been party to such artistic destruction in a period of peace. To have destroyed so much of beauty over such a length of time is a stain on our national history. We are all to blame in some way. If you leave this hall of destruction feeling grieved and shameful, then we who have prepared this exhibition will be confident that people and government will not allow it to happen again.¹²

The impact of the exhibition itself was disseminated more widely through extensive and largely positive press coverage, with sympathetic newspapers assiduously courted by Strong,¹³ and also by an accompanying best-selling book and a television programme (presented by Strong) called *Gone, Going, Going: The Fate of the Country House*.

An engagement with heritage politics also provided the V&A with a role and sense of purpose which could be communicated both to its own staff and the public, in terms of the Museum's 'usefulness' to society. As Strong saw it, exhibitions such as *Destruction* were an effective means of presenting to the public 'the problems which surround a particular part of our historic and aesthetic heritage', and in this way the Museum could become 'more outward looking and make a contribution to the community as a whole'.¹⁴

Strong was evidently keen, however, that whatever its putative purpose, the exhibition should function as useful public relations for the V&A. This is made clear in a letter mooted the show to Lady Dartmouth in October 1973, in which he declares:

What I care about so strongly is that the V & A should be deeply associated with new movements at present in hand to save these things, and that we should not be a mausoleum ready to receive odd bits that can be salvaged from these demolished beauties.¹⁵

He was equally keen that the V&A's work in this area should not be hijacked or overshadowed and was 'most anxious to avoid [...] fall[ing] into the death grips of any one preservation group',¹⁶ a point he made rather forcefully to Nikolaus Pevsner who petitioned Strong on behalf of The Victorian Society, of which he was Chair.¹⁷

Country Houses and the V&A

Anthony Burton (1999: 225) suggests that '[o]f all the things that might have stood in need of preservation, none could be more congenial to the V&A than country houses'. This was true for both taxonomic and what might be broadly termed 'political' reasons. The former is perhaps self-evident, as a museum of the decorative arts the V&A was bound to have an interest in country houses as both source and site of many of the finest examples of such. The political affinity had a number of facets. Firstly, many of the V&A's staff (at least at the level of curators and keepers) were from much the same social and intellectual milieu as country house owners and their supporters, which facilitated close associations between the Museum and the heritage lobby. The V&A's archives relating to *Destruction* contain a great deal of friendly correspondence

between Strong and numerous aristocrats and heritage campaigners. Hugh Leggatt of *Heritage in Danger* was an old friend of Strong's, and Lord Goodman and John Cornforth were also close associates. In turn, James Lees-Milne had, in the past, made good use of his personal contacts at the V&A to advance his cause. These contacts included H. Clifford Smith and Ralph Edwards in the Woodwork Department and a number of Directors. An involvement with stately homes helped the Museum to increase its holdings, research potential, scope and influence. After the Second World War, the Museum acquired three properties, Apsley House in 1947, Ham House in 1948, and Osterley Park House in 1949, which provided it with 'satellites' within easy reach of South Kensington, allowing its curators to 'study the domestic decorative arts in context' (Burton 1999: 209).

The V&A's involvement engagement with these estates, with grounds, house and collections intact, lent some weight to a favourite argument of the heritage lobby, that the ensemble represented 'the best' of English culture. The Duke of Wellington's assertion that 'the English country house is the greatest contribution made by England to the visual arts ... an association of beauty, of art and of nature...' (Mandler 1997: 343) was much bandied about in heritage propaganda. Some commentators, however, attacked this shibboleth, claiming the priorities it embodied were self-serving and misdirected. A 1974 article in *Architectural Review*, for example, claimed that this preoccupation with completeness often turned houses into 'well insured, static and deserted bastions', and asserted:

Art historians and museum directors have no knowledge of the realities of estate economy. Their rarified aesthetic concern has often only tightened the charmed circle of interest, and encouraged the ossification of the remains behind the silken cords. (C. A. 1974: 206)

Although, as numerous commentators asserted, it was not only possible but often more viable to maintain the architectural fabric of country houses by putting them to other uses, the dominant message of *Destruction* was that this approach would leave 'nothing worthwhile left to see except a beautiful façade' (Harris & Binney 1974).

Preserving a Traditional Way of Life: The Importance of 'Continuity'

Hugh Jenkins, a vocal advocate of the wealth tax, complained that '[t]hroughout the whole debate the Tories plugged the idea that anyone who possesses a valuable work himself becomes precious' (Hewison 1997: 192). He was not alone in finding the equivalence problematic, and accounts stressing the 'plight' of country house owners hard to swallow. Tales of 'aristocratic slum-dwellers' (Todd 1974), as the *Daily Mirror* dubbed them, shivering in leaking and chilly state rooms and obliged to do their own housework and gardening did little to inspire sympathy in some quarters.

A conflation of heritage estates and their occupants was nonetheless a recurrent feature of conservationist arguments, with lineage 'widely felt to entitle stewardship' (Lowenthal 1998: 92). This was evident in Strong's introduction to *Destruction*; 'The great houses of England and their occupants represent a continuity within our society. ... Country-house owners are the hereditary custodians of what was one of the most vital forces of cultural creation in our history' (quoted in Hewison 1997: 193). As Catherine Palmer (2003: 442) observes, the fact that houses have been standing for perhaps hundreds of years

...enhances their power and potency as signs of Englishness, because their physical durability ensures that what they represent will also survive, further reinforcing the notion that there are fixed and unchanging aspects of nationness passed down from one generation to the next.

Advocates of heritage, who seek to make a connection between tradition and the public good, must nonetheless negotiate what Corner and Harvey (1991: 50) describe as the

...highly intractable fact that most English people do not own the land or properties forming most of the official heritage and that, in so far as public trusts and state ownership do allow a limited idea of common property to be employed, this is of quite recent origin.

Consequently, there needs to be a strategic suggestion of 'a sufficient discontinuity with the past to permit increased access to be marked as part of the exciting promise of heritage' (1991: 50), but not one that involves 'the kind of detailed examination of the changed conditions of ownership that might threaten the imaginative appeal of inheritance as continuity.' (1991: 50) Indeed, as numerous historians have demonstrated,¹⁸ the history of the country house and its occupants has scarcely been a story of continuity, and properties would often be remodelled, entirely rebuilt or abandoned, with little thought for preservation or posterity.

Historical accuracy is not, however, necessarily a vital component of heritage discourse because, Palmer (2005: 10) maintains, it is not factual but felt history that is most important in this context: 'The notion of felt history is significant because heritage tourism is experienced primarily from within the confines of the imagination'. However, as Waterton (2011: 157, my emphasis) asserts, in order 'to sustain and shape the parameters of social debates regarding heritage issues and the way these represent social relations in both the past and the present', heritage must be 'made to appear factual'. A result of this 'is the increasing stability and natural appearance of this current representation of heritage, bringing with it a diminishing of the resources available for resistance' (Waterton 2011: 157).

Consequently, 'heritage tourism tends to reduce the complexities of history to a kind of easily digestible shorthand associated with specific and often singular locations' (Palmer 2005: 16). Heritage sites may 'thus resemble what Anderson (1991) has referred to as "imagined communities" wherein each individual imagines their fellow compatriots have the same basic understanding of what the nation is all about' (Palmer 2005: 10). The stately home might be said to be paradigmatic of this, and it is significant that country house propaganda, with Destruction no exception, sought to foster a concern for preservation issues in part by effecting an identification of English national identity with or as the country house. This was a conflation also observed by Tom Nairn, who characterised it as a mode of social control, an 'authorised hegemonic discourse':

Great Britain herself is the stately home: the State which is also Home, a power-structure which could not so convincingly be either of these things without the Crown, and a family still in residence. Where appearance is itself a dimension of power, only through them can an apparatus of authority be made to seem so profoundly homely to its subjects. (Quoted in Hewison 1997: 193)

The importance to visitors of the 'homely', and its facility for obscuring repressive social structures, was evident from Smith's interviews with country house visitors in 2004. She found that:

The idea of 'the family' was highly significant in the discourse of the country house visit. The families associated with the houses were rarely referred to as the 'aristocracy' or 'ruling class', or talked about in terms of class and power, but instead were almost inevitably and somewhat cosily and comfortably referred to as 'the family'. (Smith 2006: 137)

Presenting stately homes as family homes, with the family in question not just the resident nobility, but the nation as a whole was, as Strong (1999: 186-7) suggests, 'an astute move' because although the issue was 'the preoccupation of only a very small minority of the population', the country house lobby was able 'to present their cause as of universal concern, bestowing benefits on everyone and redressing the notion of private ownership into one focused on the stewardship of the nation's heritage' (Strong 1999: 187). This was very apparent in the exhibition texts of Destruction, and also in a Country Life editorial of 1974:

The decision to despoil the rich will despoil their heritage of houses, parks and landscapes, but this is also the nation's heritage ... the choice is between destruction and providing a situation in which owners can continue to carry out their responsibilities ... It is the country as a whole that will pay the price for this destruction... (Strong 1999: 186)

Deckha (2004: 413), however, claims that:

The English country house becomes an auratic object at the level of the nation only when it loses its function as the seat of a landed gentry family. The V&A exhibit and SAVE and its allies, concerned with the loss of a 'way of life', spawned the rise of a national cultural discourse of lost heritage, with the country house at its symbolic center.

This suggests that not only was the persuasive discourse of the country house lobby riddled with paradox, but also to a significant extent it was precisely these paradoxes that made it powerful and effective. Heritage is paradise lost, and heritage propaganda urges the preservation of an already largely vanished arcadia.

Victory for Heritage

To the delight of the heritage lobby, the Wealth Tax was shelved. As Hewison (1987: 68) reports:

Although it was never officially abandoned, when in December 1975 the Parliamentary Select Committee failed to agree, and produced no fewer than five rival draft reports, it was clear that the heritage campaign had succeeded. Hugh Jenkins lost his post as Minister for the Arts a few months later.

To what extent this was a direct consequence of the Cornforth report and Destruction is unclear, but certainly those involved were keen to take some credit. Roy Strong (1998: 158) wrote in a letter in December of 1975 that 'I now know that the Country House show profoundly influenced the Government in respect of the Wealth Tax, so 1974 did achieve something'. This may well have been true but, as Mandler (1997: 404) suggests:

Neither the Cornforth report nor the Destruction exhibition were at the time the easy, obvious successes they have since appeared. Inevitably they became embroiled in a hot political debate about the tax system, and neutral observers complained about the extreme choices being offered them – philistine confiscation or a dream of squirearchy, brute socialism or brute feudalism. What was immediately significant about both report and exhibition was the much greater public visibility and confidence of the country-house preservation lobby, its ability to intervene in such debates aggressively and successfully.

In addition to dropping the proposed wealth tax proposals, in the 1975 budget the Government granted exemptions from CTT not only for important works of art but also exceptional buildings and land. By 1976, the government had extended exemptions and subsidies even further for an increase in the public stake; in addition, owners were able to vest their assets in charitable trusts sheltered from CTT. This leniency had the desired effect of encouraging more owners to open their houses. As Mandler recounts (1997: 407, my emphasis):

These concessions to a great extent realized the proposals of the Gowers Report and, more profoundly, realized the vision that Country Life had been developing since the 1930s. As country-house advocates pointed out constantly after 1976, it was now a matter of public policy that country houses were accepted as a national heritage, with their traditional owners remaining in possession as custodians or trustees. This formula could work because enough of the public valued the country house, and enough of the owners accepted some public responsibility.

In the process, country house owners recast themselves and, claims John Martin Robinson, 'instead of presenting themselves as very rich people, they present themselves as unpaid curators of the national heritage, which is true to a certain extent' (Aristocracy 1997). Robinson suggests that they have deployed 'a very successful camouflage attempt' (Aristocracy 1997), which draws on myths of aristocratic decline and penury to generate sympathy and charitable legitimacy, whilst masking the reality of increasing wealth derived from new commercial enterprises. Notwithstanding the dissolution of some estates as a consequence of bad luck and/or judgement, Robinson maintains that

All the great families are richer now than they were any time this century. Estates are much more viable economic units than they were in the late 19th century [...] just to take Chatsworth, it's a much more vibrant economic force now than it was in the 1890s. The house is in much better condition, and better displayed, better arranged, has far more works of art in it than it had in the 1890s. (quoted in *Aristocracy* 1997)

Heritage and Politics

Although the country house remained a focal point, after 1975 the scope of heritage campaigning in the UK broadened noticeably. Marcus Binney launched a new pressure group called SAVE Britain's Heritage, with a remit ranging from 'the great legacy of the railways' to 'the simple dignity of the terraced house' (Binney 2005: 8). Also significant was the 1975 European Architectural Heritage Year, and Strong (1999: 187) observed that under the broader scrutiny of a European context there was 'a distinct swing in public and Government thinking away from the "demolish and be damned" philosophy in favour of conservation and rehabilitation'. Delafons (1997: 107) suggests the European Architectural Heritage Year 'was perhaps the beginning of the populist concern for conservation which increasingly supplanted the elitist tradition of conservation in Britain'. As part of this initiative, the first 'heritage centres' were established in Faversham, York and Chester, and the word 'heritage' quickly gained currency both within and beyond policy discourse.¹⁹

Thatcher's Conservative Government gave the concept official reinforcement through the National Heritage Acts of 1980 and 1983. The first was put through by the new Minister for the Arts, Norman St John-Stevas. Patrick Cormack celebrated the Bill's all-party support, and stated 'it is vital for the preservation of our heritage that it should never become a political football' (Wright 1985: 43). This seems an astonishingly disingenuous remark given Cormack's own active involvement in heritage issues, and certainly it could be argued that only by becoming a 'political football' had heritage been able to attract popular and legislative support. The National Heritage Memorial Fund was instituted under the control of independent trustees, who were to be, in St John-Stevas's words, 'cultured generalists' – 'possibly the last time the Great and the Good received official acknowledgment' (Hewison 1997: 267). The 1980 Act was, suggests Hewison (1997: 267);

...an enlightened piece of legislation that added the use of endowment funding to the range of funding methods, the advantage of an endowment being that the Fund's income was not entirely dependent on the vicissitudes of annual government spending battles to decide the level of grant-in-aid.

The effect of funding and legislation 'was to make "national heritage" the centrepiece of public arts policy in the 1980s'²⁰ (Mandler 1997: 411) and certainly the legislation was greeted with pleasure by Strong (1998: 255); the Heritage Bill, he claimed, epitomised

all that I fought for in the great series of exhibitions I did from country houses to churches to gardens. It was a great triumph to achieve leaving artefacts in situ in the great houses and seeing the Government indemnity system extended to regional museums and galleries.

A further coup for Strong and the V&A was St John-Stevas' decision to use it as the venue to launch the National Heritage Memorial Fund in April 1980. Strong, however, professed to be dismayed by the committee's constitution which appeared to be rather less 'generalist' than St John-Stevas had claimed; 'what a disappointing lot of people, all buildings orientated. No one whose focus is the fine arts or industrial archaeology or the natural environment' (Strong 1998: 257). If the V&A exhibition had been as influential as Strong claimed, this is a somewhat perverse complaint; the V&A was at least as responsible for the conflation of heritage and the country house as any other body.

The 1983 Act, while also welcomed by Strong, has been characterized by a number of commentators as less a response to public feeling than a result of internal power struggles

within the Conservative Party. It could be understood as forming part of the assault by Thatcher and her hard-line monetarist supporters on the more liberal, paternalistic 'wets' of the Party,²¹ and was part of a strategy to lower public spending by reducing the size of the Civil Service. Although the more entrepreneurial members of the aristocracy were reconciled to them some decades previously, Corner and Harvey (1991: 73-4) observe that the ideological implications of a commodified heritage culture were

...troubling and contradictory for the radical Right. For the patrician values of ['wet'] 'one nation' Toryism, and its emphasis on rural order, stability and continuity, co-exist uneasily with the more militant nineteenth-century values of entrepreneurial endeavour...

Wright (2009: xiii) expands on the complexities and paradoxes of this uneasy co-existence, observing that

Thatcher was a moderniser determined to use market mechanisms to reconfigure British society. At the same time, however, she was a characteristically 'reactionary' moderniser, who combined her monetarist economic policies with a rhetoric of national recovery, and of true British identity [...] Contradictory as it was, the policy was both destructive of tradition and dependent on it in order to legitimise its upheavals in the minds of those affected.

A 'quango' (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation, essentially a devolved body) was established to undertake heritage preservation duties, previously the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. This, the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England (renamed English Heritage shortly after), took a more business-like approach to national heritage and sought to exploit its money-making potential. The Commission was chaired by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, something of a pioneer in the 'heritage industry', and contained fewer 'cultured generalists' and more businessmen. Strong was generally supportive of such efforts, providing he felt them to be reasonably sympathetic; however, from his perspective, the most important aspect of the Act was its approval and facilitation of the devolution of the V&A from direct government control he had long lobbied for. For Strong, this represented a great victory and the promise of future autonomy, but for the Government it was perhaps little more than a convenient book-cooking exercise, effectively to reduce Civil Service wage bills.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively the extent to which the activities of the V&A effected, or even affected, changes in policy with regard to country houses and heritage, not least because governments have priorities and objectives that override the demands of lobby groups, what is certain is that initiatives such as Destruction provided convenient fora to bring together various interested parties engaged with heritage who were able to shape the debate on their terms. My account has emphasized the privileged backgrounds and powerful positions shared by most of the individuals involved, not to imply a conspiracy of power as such, but to indicate the relative ease with which dominant social groups are able to influence both political debate and popular understanding of socio-cultural phenomena. They were able to generate an effective if not always coherent discourse, fashioned from an emotive combination of nostalgia, English nationalism and a (to some extent manufactured) sense of urgency. Destruction provided the means to articulate this discourse and to play a part in shifting public opinion towards accepting country houses as an important and desirable aspect of the national culture, and one thus worth saving. For these reasons, the exhibition can be said to represent a pivotal moment in the history of country house preservation and heritage politics more generally, which makes it a legitimate object of study. Analysis of the event and its reception in the media provides a snapshot of public debate around heritage in the 1970s, while the archival research allows new insight into the interpersonal relationships and 'backstage' debates which underpinned the planning and execution of the exhibition. This material makes a contribution to a deeper understanding of how a potent combination of persuasive and emotive rhetoric,

forceful personalities and the authority of established institutions can construct and deploy an idea of heritage that becomes hegemonic henceforward.

This, in turn, raises questions about the ethical responsibilities of museums that not only engage directly with contentious and/or politically fraught issues, but also choose to dispense with claims of objectivity in favour of adopting and articulating a distinct position. There is scope for future research to consider the pros and cons of institutions asserting this type of ideological autonomy, and also the limitations which may be imposed on museums by the demands of funders and diverse stakeholders. Potentially enlightening too could be an analysis of the discursive 'legacy' of Destruction and related initiatives and the extent to which the concepts there deployed – 'danger', 'continuity', the stately home as the national family home – persist in popular representations of heritage, in the promotional literature of conservation bodies, as well as popular television shows and dramas. The National Trust's membership has increased from 226,000 to four million since 1970, making it one of the largest membership bodies in the UK,²² while *Downton Abbey* is the most successful television costume drama since *Brideshead Revisited*, attracting UK audiences in excess of 11 million viewers. As Hewison (1997: 193) observes, the country house certainly has 'a powerful hold on the English imagination', and whether or not this type of populist nostalgia perpetuates and 'enshrines a mystique based on inequality and hierarchy' (Lowenthal 1998: 91), at least some of its current popularity can be credibly ascribed to Destruction and the efforts of the personnel of the V&A and their associates in the heritage lobby in the 1970s.

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Notes

- ¹ This association was remodelled as a semi-public body, the British Tourist Authority, in 1969. See Mandler (1997: 398) for further detail.
- ² Letter from L. J. Lickorish, Director General, British Tourist Authority to Roy Strong (12 March 1974) in V&A Archive file, MA/28/243/1.
- ³ The inverted commas here are lifted from Mandler's (reasonably sympathetic, but generally balanced) account of these events. It is not entirely clear from the text whether these are merely quotation marks or imply that the report might have been less than 'wholly independent'. Given the source of the Report's funding we might infer the latter, but even the most hostile of critics praise its scholarly integrity and careful balance, so such a description may be taken at face value. Interestingly, although an old associate of Strong's and despite providing much of the impetus for the exhibition, Cornforth was not directly involved in Destruction. The nominal reason given for this was that the exhibition dates clashed with the publication of his report, but I would risk the speculation that he was reluctant to align himself with such a political and polemical enterprise.
- ⁴ See letters from Roy Strong to Lady Dartmouth, Chair of the Executive Committee of European Architectural Heritage Year (25 October 1973) and Christopher Gibbs (1 November 1973) in V&A Archive file, MA/28/243/1.
- ⁵ The exhibition was primarily funded not by public money but by private sponsorship, with £10,000 provided by the American philanthropist Henry J Heinz II, of the famous food processing empire. There is perhaps some irony in an exhibition intended to preserve English heritage being made possible by new American money.
- ⁶ See letters from Roy Strong to Christopher Gibbs (1 November 1973), Paul Channon, MP (1 February 1974) and Lady Dartmouth (25 October 1973 and 1 February 1974) in V&A Archive file, MA/28/243/1.
- ⁷ Text taken from preparatory document, dated 12 September 1974, held in V&A Archive.

- ⁸ Text taken from preparatory document, dated 12 September 1974, held in V&A Archive.
- ⁹ Roy Strong, 'Acknowledgement for the Country House Exhibition Catalogue', memo dated 31 May 1974, in V&A Archive File MA/29/184/2.
- ¹⁰ Memo from John Harris to Peter Thornton (5 February 1974), in V&A Archive file MA/28/243/1.
- ¹¹ Text taken from preparatory document, dated 12 September 1974, held in V&A Archive.
- ¹² Text taken from preparatory document, dated 12 September 1974, held in V&A Archive.
- ¹³ See, for example, correspondence between Strong and *The Sunday Times*, May 1974, in V&A Archive file, MA/29/184/2, and between Strong and John Anstey, Editor of *The Daily Telegraph Magazine*, also May 1974, in V&A Archive file, MA/29/184/3.
- ¹⁴ Letter from Roy Strong to Nikolaus Pevsner, 30 May 1974, in V&A Archive file, MA/29/184/3.
- ¹⁵ Letter from Roy Strong to Lady Dartmouth, 25 October 1973, in V&A Archive file, MA/28/243/1.
- ¹⁶ Letter from Roy Strong to The Duke of Grafton, 1 February 1974, in V&A Archive file MA/28/243/3.
- ¹⁷ Correspondence between Nikolaus Pevsner and Roy Strong, May 1974, in V&A Archive file MA/29/184/3.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Mandler (1997), Mark Girouard (1978) and David Cannadine (1992).
- ¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Walsh (1992).
- ²⁰ Arguably it was its success as such, and thus inextricably associated with Conservative administrations that accounts for New Labour's apparent total aversion to the concept of heritage. Certainly it was not a term that was ever used explicitly in New Labour cultural policy discourse.
- ²¹ During her term as Leader of the Conservative Party and as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher dubbed those members of the Party who did not support her hardline Monetarist economic strategies as 'wets', the implication being that they were weak and too governed by emotion rather than reason. Thatcher expunged wets from her Cabinet and key government posts, ensuring she was surrounded by like-minded supporters. The 'wets' themselves would have referred to themselves as 'One-nation Tories' or 'Liberal' or 'Compassionate Conservatives'. They adhered to an older, more traditional (and perhaps more upper class) Conservative ideology, suspicious of untrammelled capitalism, which stressed a benevolent paternalism and aspired towards a unified citizenry based on a 'natural' social hierarchy.
- ²² <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/what-we-do/who-we-are/our-history/>

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