

The Interview: Linda Monckton Research, Places of Worship and English Heritage

Jackie Hall

Tell me a bit about English Heritage research policy.

English Heritage has a number of heads of research policy, each dealing with different thematic areas, whose job it is to devise an English Heritage research strategy for their particular area. I have been in post less than a year and am currently devising a research strategy for places of worship.

How are you doing that?

I have undertaken a great deal of informal consultation as means of understanding the sector and the issues that different parts of it see as important to their work; when the draft comes out there will be a period of formal consultation. In fact, this is an opportunity for your readers to contact me about key issues in church archaeology that they feel should be incorporated into the English Heritage research strategy. I am particularly keen to hear about below-ground archaeology, burial grounds, churchyards and landscape archaeology (within a places-of-worship context). We also have a Places of Worship Forum at English Heritage, with members from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Ecclesiological Society, the Church of England and the other exempt denominations. This is a useful way for English Heritage to consult with other parts of the sector.

What will the strategy look like?

The Thematic Research Strategies are primarily intended to serve English Heritage by identifying

research which furthers corporate goals; but, since English Heritage shares its responsibilities with many other agencies, they seek also to express wider concerns and reflect views from the different communities engaged in the understanding and managing of the historic environment. What it won't be is a list of research projects that English Heritage will fund. Instead it will provide a framework both for guiding English Heritage's own work and for guiding funding from the Historic Environment Enabling Programme (HEEP). It will help to prioritise research in different areas related to places of worship. There will be core priority areas and overarching themes, such as burial archaeology, as well as more tightly focused research.

Tell me about Heritage at Risk

Every year English Heritage focuses attention on a particular Heritage at Risk subject. In 2009 it was conservation areas. This year English Heritage is carrying out the first national survey of *Places of Worship at Risk*. On 30th June 2010 it will announce the results of a sample survey that offers an insight into the condition of England's listed religious heritage to find out how many buildings are at serious risk of decay. Research has involved looking at a representative 10% sample of listed places of worship of all kinds across the country. Many factors can make places of worship more at risk, such as demographic trends or changing religious beliefs. English Heritage can only deal with the impact these factors have and so the survey has looked solely at condition. However, there are mechanisms to help places of worship, and

several initiatives will be announced at the Heritage at Risk launch. I should point out that the Places of Worship Heritage at Risk Register will not be published until 2011. It is very important that churches and other groups whose buildings are on the list are informed first, and have an opportunity to respond if they want to.

What else is happening this year?

Well, the research strategy will be launched this year. We will continue to develop support packages and targeted advice for congregations and denominations.

English Heritage has agreed to publish books on Nonconformist Chapels and on British Mosques, and research for these is underway by their respective authors. I continue to develop initiatives with sector partners and denominations in order to assess how best we can work together to address core priorities for research for places of worship. In addition, we remain committed to the 'Taking Stock' programme.

What is 'Taking Stock'?

Taking Stock is a programme of historical/architectural/archaeological 'audits' of churches, commissioned by a diocese or equivalent, with funding and support from EH, using a robust but flexible methodology evolved by EH through an increasing body of practical experience. It provides partners with an up-to-date, authoritative evaluation of their buildings ensuring that their 'heritage' potential is factored into any pastoral planning. From it dioceses get a greater degree of certainty as to the qualities of its buildings as historic assets, ensuring greater clarity in understanding the implications of managed change. It is especially valuable in those areas with poor or out of date lists.

The programme has been taken up most enthusiastically by the Roman Catholic Church in England, and so far eight out of 19 RC dioceses have had a Taking Stock Survey carried out and four more are at project initiation stage.

How does the research strategy fit into this?

In a number of ways. In relation to Heritage at Risk research can provide knowledge about attitudes, perceptions and the issues that face places of worship: for instance English Heritage is currently studying trends in church closure. At the moment, because of the availability of data, this has only covered Anglican churches, but it is something that I want to develop further. In addition we have commissioned another project from a consultant to examine the social and economic factors affecting how people look after their religious buildings: what is difficult; what is easy; and what they think English Heritage should be doing about it. We particularly want to engage with different faith groups, especially those who use listed buildings such as the Sikh congregation who use an old Congregational chapel. We want to know whether people view listed status as an enhancement or a problem and to understand better how to meet their needs.

The research strategy will also help us develop areas that are priorities for managing change in an informed way. Church interiors are, for example, probably one of the most frequently contested issues. It would really help us to manage potential change if we could look holistically at historic interiors. Then we would be in a better position to assess the significance of individual interiors. Criteria for significance might include completeness (a single phase interior); complexity (a multi-phase interior); rarity of individual object within the interior. Assessment of significance is a matter of judgment and good research can greatly help.

All this is very practical. Will 'pure' research have any place in your forthcoming strategy?

If by **pure**, you mean research that is not aimed at application to practical problems, then no. The nature of the organisation is such that research carried out or supported by English Heritage is directed towards the achievement of the organisation's strategic aims and objectives. This research will therefore be basic, applied or experimental in nature. Part of this will be driven by a need to aid heritage protection; understanding significance is part of this and therefore

targeted work on areas known to be either at risk or poorly understood are undertaken on this basis.

Will universities have any part to play in the research strategy?

Yes. I have already consulted a range of universities and academics. In terms of implementation of a research agenda then universities can develop projects in conjunction with English Heritage, and they can apply for money to HEPP, just like any other group can. In fact, we have recently run a scoping seminar with Kellogg College at Oxford University on Islamic Studies. This was to gather together experts and understand the debates and dialogues in this field better; the results of this will help in refining and developing the Research Strategy.

Since 2004 English Heritage has been funding a large-scale and significant research project at York Minster. This is a building of international significance, and by using a range of research methods the project is designed to recover the lost 12th-century phases of the cathedral, and includes a reconsideration of the 11th-century building which is essential for understanding the 12th-century work. The project combines architectural, archaeological and historical sources in order to bring together the full range of available evidence and is being carried out by the University of York (Dr Christopher Norton) and Ryedale Archaeology Services (Stuart Harrison).

How do you see the role of archaeology in shaping future research agendas on places of worship?

Archaeology is embedded into future research agendas through, for example, the need for synthesis of existing material, and issues relating to burial grounds and human remains in particular. In addition we are trying to enable better access to archaeological 'grey literature' and backlog material in order to unlock the research dividend in these areas. Alongside this English Heritage will continue to support emergency cases, providing our criteria are met, to ensure adequate protection or recording.

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