

Commentary

by Gromaticus

World Heritage! whose heritage?

ONE WAY OR another, England's World Heritage sites have been much in the news lately. These ten sites are part of an elite of nearly 500 worldwide that have been placed on UNESCO's World Heritage List of "cultural and natural sites of outstanding universal value" and thus deserving of conservation as "part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole". Although inclusion on the list carries no legal force, a prerequisite for inclusion is "the existence of effective legal protection and the establishment or firm prospect of management plans to ensure sites' conservation and presentation". Just as well, when you discover that between them the ten sites attract 13 million visitors each year, over half from overseas. Nice earners, in danger of wearing out under the impact of millions of feet, to put it crudely.

It's perhaps not surprising, then, that Sir Jocelyn Stevens (Chairman of English Heritage) has called for a "new crusade" on behalf of England's World Heritage sites, highlighting the poor condition of some of them, and the threats to them from development and road plans. English Heritage is, for example, grant-aiding Durham Cathedral, and seeking Lottery funding for work at Canterbury Cathedral and at Stonehenge and Avebury. Clearly, these sites are seen as the flagships of England's heritage 'industry' and a major component in what is becoming known as 'sustainable tourism'.

In July the Department for National Heritage nominated Maritime Greenwich (the Royal Naval College, the National Maritime Museum, the old Royal Observatory, the Queen's House, Greenwich Park, the old town centre, St. Alfege's Church, and the Cutty Sark) for addition to the List. This would make it London's third site, alongside the Tower of London and Westminster (Palace of Westminster, Westminster Abbey and St. Margaret's Church). While this is obviously connected with the proposed Millennium Festival on a nearby site, it is a worthy proposal in its own right, and I wish it success.

How are the other sites faring? The management plans for the Tower of London (one of the first in the field) got off to a shaky start with criticism of proposals to flood the moat (see *LA* 7, no. 15 (1995) 387), but it seems likely that Stonehenge will be the source of the fiercest debate. After years of discus-

sion about what should be done to remedy Stonehenge's inadequate setting, culminating in a major Planning Conference in 1995, it had been agreed that removal of the A303 trunk road was essential. The choice seemed to lie between the 'Green Tunnel' route beneath the area, and the 'Improved Purple' route to the north. The former probably had the most support (including English Heritage and the National Trust), but the latter was not without its supporters. When I wrote about this last year (*LA* 7, no. 15 (1995) 386), I warned that even rejected proposals "have a nasty habit of bouncing back". Well, it gives me no pleasure to say "I told you so". It was reported in July that the Government was about to choose the 'Grey Route' to the south of Stonehenge — superficially the cheapest but also the most damaging route. Philip Dixon, President of the Council for British Archaeology, described the news, if true, as "a deplorable betrayal of commitments which the Government has made to the rest of the world, and of principles of sustainable conservation which it urges on everyone else".

Meanwhile, four firms have been shortlisted to build and operate the proposed new Stonehenge Visitor Centre: the Tussauds Group, Heritage Projects (managers of the Jorvik Viking Centre), the Imagination Group (of the Greenwich Millennium Festival) and the York Consortium. The total cost is estimated to be £68m, to which it is hoped the National Lottery will contribute half.

At this point, one would normally suggest that the various parties involved should get together and talk about it. As this is what is supposed to have happened last year, one is left wondering just what is going on.

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