

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## Protecting our heritage

For archaeologists, the highlight of the 2008/09 Parliamentary session will be the progress of the Heritage Protection Bill, promised for this autumn's Queen's Speech. After years of public consultation, culminating in the White Paper *Heritage Protection for the 21st Century* in 2007, a draft Bill was published by DCMS this April. It aims to replace the complicated and confusing system that has accumulated piecemeal since the late 19th century with simple and coherent legislation, and to move decision-making from central government to English Heritage and to local level.

So what, as the Bill stands, are its main provisions? They are:

- The creation of a unified national designation system by the merging of the current listing, scheduling and registration regimes, and their extension to cover the marine historic environment and sites of early human activity without structures. English Heritage will consult the public on the priorities for future places, sites and buildings to be designated. Owners of historic places will be consulted when the site is being considered for designation, and will also have a new right of appeal to the Secretary of State against English Heritage's decision. Interim legal protection will be introduced for historic places being considered for designation to prevent damage or hasty demolition.
- The establishment of a single publicly-accessible register for nationally-designated assets, which will contain all existing listed buildings, scheduled monuments, registered parks, gardens and battlefields, designated historic wrecks and World Heritage Sites. It will be available online and will explain what is special and why.
- A new Heritage Asset Consent that merges the current Listed Building Consent and Scheduled Monument Consent regimes, to be administered by local authorities, and the merger of Conservation Area Consent with

Planning Permission. English Heritage will continue to give expert advice.

- The establishment of Heritage Partnership Agreements (HPAs): statutory management agreements between owners, local authorities and English Heritage that allow long-term strategic management and prior consent for agreed works. They will remove the need for repetitive consent applications for large or complex sites such as office blocks, university campuses and groups of railway stations. Pilot projects have so far proved to be very successful.
- A statutory duty on local authorities to establish and maintain, or have access to, a Historic Environment Record (HER).<sup>1</sup>

English Heritage, through its Heritage Protection Reform Implementation Team, are preparing themselves to take on these new responsibilities, which they anticipate will start in 2010, and will take at least five years to implement fully. Greater involvement of the voluntary sector and the public in general, through consultation with English Heritage and local authorities, seems to be a particular emphasis. Among their many tasks, one of special interest to archaeologists will be the preparation of a new PPS to replace both PPG15 and PPG16.

This rationalisation of our present convoluted system is long overdue and is to be welcomed. It is important that the Bill 'gets it right', because it will be many years before there is another such opportunity. Whether it succeeds will depend partly on the extent to which it is modified during its passage through Parliament, but mainly on the extent to which Government is prepared to 'put its money where its mouth is'. The Bill puts new financial burdens on both English Heritage and local authorities, and there is no way that they can be recouped in the short term through 'efficiency savings' or the like. There may well be savings in the long term, but the transition is likely to be expensive. Savings are most likely to accrue to central government (which is

shedding responsibilities) and to the owners of historic assets (because they will find it easier and faster to engage with the new system). There must be a worry, too, about the preparedness of local authorities to take on their new responsibilities. English Heritage, as one would expect, have their preparations well in hand, but can the same be said for local authorities up and down the country? Do they have the necessary expertise in-house? If not, how will they acquire it, and who will provide the training? Despite English Heritage's best efforts, we might see a very patchy implementation of the reforms.

## Fieldwork Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2007 is being distributed with this issue. If you have not received your copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (address on p. 33). Our thanks go to Cath Maloney for collating the Fieldwork Round-up, and to Isabel Holroyd for the Publications section. Please let us know of any omissions. This is the longest Fieldwork Round-up that we have ever published, mainly due the preparations for the 2012 Olympics, which we have therefore listed separately in the boroughs concerned. One is bound to wonder how this will all ever be integrated and published, and what arrangements are in place to make this possible.

## Online at last

Our long-running digitisation programme is at last coming to fruition. We hope that by the time this issue is printed, Volumes 1–10 will be freely available online *via* the Archaeology Data Service ([ads.ahds.ac.uk](http://ads.ahds.ac.uk)).

## Colour or black-and-white?

Readers will notice a higher proportion of black-and-white illustrations in this issue. We would like to reassure them that this is not a trend or a change in policy; it just reflects the use of old photographs by some of our authors.

1. This information has been taken from P. Beacham 'The Heritage Protection Bill' *Conservation bulletin* 58 (2008) 44–45, and from <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.13381>.