

Multi-cultural Interpretation and Access to Heritage

The majority of British people are people of goodwill, not racists. However, we also realise that dormant goodwill is not enough. The drama of recent domestic events around the death of Stephen Lawrence, and world events in Indonesia and Britain's engagement with Kosovo have all fuelled growing pools of frustrated latent energy ready to be directed towards action for change.

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry has changed the consciousness of this country with respect to race relations. Britain's engagement, as one of 19 countries, with Kosovo has taken us beyond a view of domestic race relations to the realisation of the need for urgent attention to relationships between different cultures at home and on the world stage. There is now a genuine open atmosphere for change within our country. There is a readiness for a new multi-culturalism within which the heritage sector can play a significant role.

A new multi-culturalism

Everyone uses the term multi-cultural society. Too often it seems simply to mean that we are trapped on these islands with a lot of people whose origins stem from different cultures, and it is a matter of coping with these alien intrusions.

The debate has mostly revolved around controlling the negative aspects of the situations. But, a crucial development is to jump the gap to the wish and to direct our energies towards positive action - to connect with different cultures to begin the solution of living the reality of the complexity of one human race upon the Earth our only home. The new open atmosphere for change within our country is ready to accept the need for unifying concepts of culture.

I would like to propose a particular view - a new multi-culturalism which sees diverse cultures as an illustration of the range of potential of the human personality. Within this vision the multi-cultural world returns to us what belongs to us all.

Unique cultures are cultures which once upon a time evolved in isolation. Isolated groups, through the impact of their particular environment combined with the human potential of the group, produced solutions to living as a unique culture. But, as soon as we meet with other cultural groups, we become multi-cultural.

Once upon a time we used to have cultural isolation through the simple fact that we could not cross a river, a mountain, or the sea. But in a world of mass travel and mass media, we live in a world which opens us to multiple cultural influences with no escape.

All cultures belong to us as the human race. Being in touch with them awakens aspects of ourselves and gives us the choice of how we wish to be even when many of the elements are mutually exclusive. World cultures show us what we can all be in particular circumstances - humanity in all its glory, as well as in all its cruelty. It is a great lesson.

Some people feel that multi-culturalism flattens everyone. But, fortunately, we actually have no time within a single lifetime even to begin to encompass all the cultural aspects on offer. We are actually doomed to uniqueness. A contemporary definition of a unique culture at particular point in time is that of a "unique combination" of multi-cultural elements.

We have come too far in time for cultures not to be multi-cultural. History has been a story of the meeting and interaction of cultures. We can think that our culture is completely unique only because we do not know of the origin of the cultural aspects we hold so dear. A lot of work needs to be done around facilitating the enjoyment and valuing the excitement of a multi-cultural society.

A shift of vision - a challenge to the heritage sector

A shift of vision in relation to the meaning of a multi-cultural society will require a shift in vision about heritage interpretation. Nothing is destroyed, rather interpretation needs to be extended.

The multi-cultural interpretation of heritage will provide for revelatory experiences, discovery and personal transformation, moving away from a defensive superior mono-cultural stance that is competitive and divisive rather than integrational.

History is a living entity that survives through relevant contemporary re-interpretation. A past that is petrified through being framed by out of date interpretive values will instigate their own destruction through being irrelevant to its audience. Such presentations elicit the reaction "What's all this got to do with us?" or "Where is the bit about us?" Contemporary interpretation requires the recognition of every player in the scene.

There are organisations such as the National Trust which are conscious of the growing weakness of their stance in many of their properties and are actively searching for avenues of change. I would like to acknowledge the important groundbreaking work going on in particular areas of this huge network, and that changes cannot take place overnight. I therefore ask the National Trust to indulge me in taking one of their properties to illustrate my thinking while so much forward looking work is in progress.

Penrhyn Castle is in North Wales. The Penrhyn family owned most of the quarrying industry in North Wales.

I live in the little village of Llanberis at the foot of Snowdon. It was a quarrying village until the 1960's. I asked some of the last older quarrymen whether they were invited to the opening of the property as a new National Trust acquisition. "Oh yes." they said, and to my surprise they said they went as well. They then added, "Yes, we went to the opening of Penrhyn Castle. We then spat on it and left. We will never set foot in that estate ever again in our lifetime. "

From going around Penrhyn Castle myself, I must comment that the stance of the interpretation of this estate is out of tune with our time. We live in era in which human rights, Equal Opportunities, ethics, social inclusion all stand side by side as daily themes of engagement. The inclusion of the ordinary person, especially when they are part of the history of a property, is expected to be part of the basic values of an organisation which pledges to be "for everyone". The interpretation cassette certainly glorified the values of the Penrhyn family. It interpreted the property and its objects to be bearing witness to the formula of "wealth + virtue + benevolence + artistic patronage + grand estate".

This is a property which can lend itself to multi-cultural interpretation with a powerful social context. The Penrhyn family made their first fortune on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, and with the proceeds of that first exploitation, set up the quarrying industry that exploited the people of North Wales. Here are two struggling contemporary deprived ethnic communities - North Wales with its minority Welsh speakers, and the Caribbean communities who are movingly united in the scenario of exploitation. Penrhyn Castle was literally built on their backs. Interpreted from the values of today, we would give credit to many facets of the property as a monument not to the Penrhyn family, but to the slaves of the sugar plantations and the quarrymen as the true builders of the wealth of their time. Of course, it is right and necessary and instructive to learn about the class values of the past, but it is one thing to give information, another to condone. Interpretation is the extra layer that shows us where we stand today in relation to the knowledge of what it was like in the past. We do, through interpretation, pass judgement, and show where we stand.

Moving beyond negative history into a brighter future

Penrhyn as a heritage property is an open sore for the quarrying communities of North Wales. Moving away from the fact that Penrhyn Castle is a National Trust property, we may ask the question why is money spent to buy that property instead of say a quarry itself and parts of a quarrying village to tell the story from the point of view of the working population?

Here is a situation where living heritage embodied in the ordinary population actively resists and contradicts an outdated mode of values and interpretation. A pivotal fact of heritage acquisition and interpretation is that it is overburdened by modes of values and interpretation that stem from an aristocratic tradition. These tend to concentrate on valuing products which are made possible only through the application of wealth and are therefore necessarily related to wealth.

The scenario of Penrhyn brings the relevance of heritage interpretation into sharp focus, because here the interpretation of a property directly attacks the nature of the memory of those living in the immediate vicinity, who

feel misrepresented and unrepresented. But, let us not forget that it is the same even if something from the distant past is interpreted in conflict or in omission of those who remain connected to a piece of heritage as a fact of life.

The impact of contact with heritage does not end with the departure from a heritage site or an encounter with a heritage object. The experience positions us in the world.

All of us have a resistance to the exposure of negative aspects of history related to ourselves. It is a fear that we do not confront at our peril. There have been many positive moves in recent years about putting in the full glare of day the facts of the Holocaust, of British concentration camps, of Pinochet and torture in Chile. We have witnessed the dignity of people who move from shame to the assumption of courage to re-position themselves. Taking a stance, passing judgement is also part and parcel of heritage interpretation.

One can leave history behind meaningfully and move on liberated. It is recognition, laying bare the facts, that sets us all free.

When I was in South Africa in 1994, just before the first elections, we were invited to a reception in one of the town's major civic buildings. Walking through the grand entrance up the steps, a Councillor said to me. "Do you know that until now, only white people walked through this entrance into this building? I think it has been dreadful. I am so happy that it is all changing. I do not know what to say to people such as yourself to make it all right." I said to her then, "But you have just done it, by passing judgement openly as you have and making clear your position, you have enabled us to walk through that entrance together into a different future. It is the silence, the doubt whether anything ever changes, the non-recognition, and therefore the unresolved hurt that divides people and damages faith. It is true that even the most terrible things can be forgiven if we join together."

Reconciliation comes through recognition of hurt and suffering, and reparation towards a human and social debt. It is optimistic that such items can be on the agenda of the policy makers of today.

The possible contribution of multi-cultural interpretation

Multi-cultural interpretation contributes towards:

- The recognition of the role of other cultures and what cultures owe to each other.
- The relevant inclusion of different cultures, therefore situating members of the community in a shared history that can be a revelation.
- Bringing forward the connection to formerly excluded cultures and inspiring the missing contribution of members of the community from those cultures. This results in access by everyone therefore to the richness and relevance of inter-cultural exchange that is possible in our multi-cultural society.
- Enabling us to be aware of ourselves as participants working towards an integrated world through setting heritage within the perspective of an interdependent and multi-cultural world. Such a context enables us to recognise that the outlook and behaviour of each of us affects the future of the world and therefore changes our lives.
- Enabling the heritage sector to play an essential role in the promotion of multi-culturalism within the community. This is a contribution to the challenge to racism, a major issue in our unstable world.
- Enabling heritage organisations to play a role in encouraging the full participation by everyone in the development of the heritage sector and in acting as a catalyst for multi-cultural action beyond the organisation.

Multi-culturalism and multi-cultural interpretation for everyone

It is sad that, in many instances, the concept of multi-culturalism has been highlighted only in areas where there is a significant proportion of ethnic minorities within the community. Multi-culturalism is a central concept that recognises that everyone on this earth is interdependent and increasingly important to one another.

It also recognises that the denial of cultural presence strikes at the heart of identity, and therefore in a sense of the existence and being of people. Denial of cultural presence touches a powerful force. If we dare, and we need to dare to situate ourselves on the sharp edges of reality - we must admit that we live in a dangerously unstable world where cultural sparks ignite catastrophes, leaving scorched earth our barren heritage.

There is an even more important role for the presence of a multi-cultural dimension in areas where there are no ethnic minority communities, for if there is no opportunity for direct contact with other cultures, the significance of multi-cultural activities may not have been seriously considered. Lack of contact allows one to think of other cultures as distant, completely separate and inaccessibly different. It is the absence of contact which enables one to ignore, distrust without basis, or demonise.

Mono-cultural glorification and superiority is destructively out of step with the irreversibly multicultural world within which we live.

Examples of multi-cultural interpretation

To make concrete some of the points made with regard to the potential of multi-cultural interpretation, let's return to Penrhyn Castle. Here I would like to widen the concept of cultural groups to those cultures within cultures created by the division of society into distinct social groups :

- The recognition of the role of other cultures and what cultures owe to each other.
At Penrhyn the role of the slaves in the Caribbean, and the quarrymen in the history of North Wales should be acknowledged, and the price they paid exposed. Arenas should be found where their story can be told from their experience.
- The recognition of the contribution of different socio-cultural groups within society should be a central feature of multi-cultural interpretation.
At Penrhyn Castle, instead of being asked to admire the taste of the aristocrat who commissioned a beautifully crafted chair, we may be asked to exalt the taste of the talented artist who created it with imagination and outstanding skills, and to be inspired to find out more about the development of his craft in relation to the possibilities offered by the class to which he belonged.
- To bring forward the interpretation of other formerly excluded but relevant and connected cultures and therefore to inspire the coming forward of members of the community linked to those cultures. It may result in putting everyone into contact with the richness and relevance of inter-cultural exchange within our multicultural society.

When connections to other cultures become part and parcel of interpretation, the people whose histories are linked to those other formerly excluded cultures feel recognised. Their belonging here is confirmed. Belonging and recognition is the basis of all participation. There is also an awakening within the general population of this relatedness, and a building up of a scenario within which it is natural for us to be here together. The ethnic minorities of this country are 'the world within Britain'. There is a special opportunity here for everyone to engage with our own British citizens and through them with the world.

As I walked through Penrhyn Castle, because I am Chinese, I wanted to know more about the hand-painted Chinese wallpaper, or the Chinese porcelain vase. This property, and many other properties which embody enormous potential for multi-cultural interpretation, can imaginatively run a scheme to involve local communities linked to different cultures to be involved in developing leaflets or information packs linked to single objects from their culture, tracing their history as part of the history of the development of particular crafts, discovering what life was like at that time in that country, and whether there was a relationship through which the Estate came to acquire the object.

- To be aware of ourselves as participants working towards an integrated world and to recognise that the outlook and behaviour of each of us affects the future of the world and therefore changes our lives.

Interpretation that illuminates the relationships between the social classes and groups of the past and knowledge about the consequences, attitudes and the access to resources teach us lessons which assist us in shaping how we would like society to operate today.

Open and accessible heritage interpretation can play a significant role in social progress.

- To recognise the essential role of the heritage sector in promotion of multi-culturalism within the community and in particular the contribution this makes to the challenge to racism.

Multi-cultural interpretation in heritage would anchor the culture of ethnic groups to find their rightful place in the history of this country and of the world. It would also enable everyone to form a relationship to ethnic groups as fellow citizens who were always historically related to Britain, and who have reason and right to be here. As part of each other we can retrieve and begin the process of unlocking the cultural riches we have to give to each other and be strengthened in our search for a common and bright future.

- To recognise the role that heritage organisations can play in encouraging full participation by everyone in the community and providing a catalyst for action beyond the organisation.

Once we are open to the idea that all cultures are now intrinsically multi-cultural and that all cultures belong to us, our perception of everything that is around us is transformed. There is a huge potential for activity through linking up. None of us can do everything but we can feed the interests which we have created and link up with others to pick up where we leave off, and simply network as the short cut to getting what we wish to achieve.

My own fascination with the Chinese wallpaper at Penrhyn Castle may lead to my being directed to a museum with lots of examples of wallpapers (or in this age of technology I can use a web-site in the castle to initially explore this). This may lead to my being interested in what the actual plants are that are used in the designs, and engender my desire to obtain and grow these in my garden. With most of China being in the temperate zone, many Chinese plants are common features in this country. It may lead to an idea such as having a reproduction of the wallpaper set in a school where there are many Chinese children, or in the local mother tongue Chinese school, and growing plants which are portrayed in the designs - leading to the schoolchildren wishing to visit Penrhyn Castle!

Multi-cultural interpretation and the subsequent opening up of connections will naturally instigate a momentum for the coming together of the many separate areas of interest and expertise within the heritage sector. The connections would propel audiences interested in one area into another, enlarging the audience for engagement with heritage for all. And beyond that advancing into other sectors.

Heritage is what we had and what we have - everywhere

There is a place for beautiful precious things which need protection, but heritage is not just about aesthetic objects locked within estates and museums and galleries. It is everything that defines us. It is also the ugly and meaningful, the pretty or the kitsch. It can be alive or dead. It is all around us.

Black Environment Network promotes a particular community project called "The cultural garden".

When I was developing the first cultural garden at Walnut Tree Walk School in London, I talked to a friend who trained in horticulture at Windsor about identifying plants which came from the countries of origin of the inner city children. She laughed and said, "The typical British Garden, particularly the English Cottage Garden, is but a collection of glorified foreign weeds!"

Indeed, to create a garden with plants from different parts of the world, we can get only what can grow here and what is already here. And, what is already here is astonishing. Dahlias from Mexico, Magnolias from China,

Gladiolus and Red Hot Poker from Africa, Bergenia from Siberia, the Indian Bean Tree from South America, Peach Trees from Iran, Oriental Poppy from Armenia and so on.

Through taking part in the creation of the cultural garden, the children at Walnut Tree were amazed to find that all the 'English' gardens they see on their way to school are full of plants connecting them to all parts of the world. They came into school shouting, "I have Chinese plants in my garden." Finding out created a shift in vision - a discovery that multi-cultural elements are all around us, that plants from their countries of origin have been here and loved for a long time! And, all of this is here because of inter-cultural engagement.

Such an example of the shift in vision leads us to the proposal that the most appropriate interpretation of the environment at large is multi-cultural interpretation.

Look in Marks & Spencer. One day such a shop will be looked back on as a real feature of our time, with goods made from all over the world. A single meal on our dinner table may include rice from China, tomatoes from Italy, bacon from Denmark, pistachios from Iran, oranges from Africa, wine from Australia, beer from Mexico, carnations from Bolivia in the vase. It will be known as the century when all the cultures of the world met.

Multi-cultural interpretation is about the coming together of people and heritage on a grand stage, from which we cannot get off - we are one people living on one earth, our only home.

The role of Black Environment Network BEN

Black Environment Network (BEN) is established to promote Equal Opportunities, with respect to ethnic participation in the context of sustainable development. The integrated approach that is a hallmark of our work has taken us into working with various sectors of concern.

The rise of multi-culturalism is a key progressive concept of our time. Embodied in sustainable development is the principle of the right to engagement with heritage.

BEN defines engagement with heritage as:

- Access to the use and enjoyment of heritage
- Access to information, activities and resources enabling an informed experience of heritage
- Participation in the protection, preservation and development of heritage

BEN works on two principal fronts to create a climate within which full ethnic participation can take place in the context of sustainable development:

- We work to represent issues and concerns of ethnic groups against the vast stage onto which connection with cultures takes us - our multi-cultural world.
- At the same time we work, through raising awareness and the provision of training, to enable organisational personnel to acquire the necessary understanding and skills to work effectively with ethnic groups, and through them to connect to the living cultures of the world.

Physical and intellectual access to heritage

Access to engagement with heritage is not only about physical access. But yes, due to prevalent poverty among many ethnic groups it is fundamental to aim to fund transport, entrance fees, and other basic needs to enable heritage experience and facilitate inclusion in programmes of activity. But, we also need to address intellectual access - the generation of activities, heritage resources and site-interpretation which reflect and draw from diverse cultures.

Multi-cultural interpretation is interpretation within a framework which recognises that all cultures are multi-cultural and that culture is in evolution. We are all recipients of culture as well as the creators of culture.

Of course it is of utmost importance that local, national and international histories are presented, but we must acknowledge that the values which frame their presentation are our own and that they are all connected within a world picture.

We may aim to make known the values of the past, but the tone and presentation of this material communicates the values and judgement of the present. It is one thing to examine the values of aristocrats within a National Trust property, another to glorify them alone. All of us, individuals or organisations, if we pledge to be open to everyone, then we need to work consciously at positioning ourselves socially and culturally, and be aware of the personal impact of interpretation on those who we propose to serve. Do we tell working class folk that it is all right to ignore the contribution of their ancestors? Do we condone the piracy of works of artworks and other treasures from other nations?

When one enters a site or engages in activities of any kind, messages are everywhere. One is immediately confronted by interpretive resources that begin to draw boundaries. Those of us who are in charge of public sites and who run public programmes of activities, with the remit to serve all sections of society, need to examine how we make our special contribution through the expertise of our field of work, but at the same time engage those we serve in a relevant way. We should always attempt to go beyond ourselves and ask some vital questions :

- Do we value the interaction and creativity that is essential for building a cohesive vibrant and progressive culture that involves everyone in working together for a better future?
- Does our work acknowledge the common ownership of knowledge and skills?
- Do we strategically contribute to access to our organisation by everyone?
- Who are we providing for when we present our work in the way we do?
- What do we offer as a special resource and how can we develop resources which are socially and culturally relevant to those we serve?
- Are we stimulating participation and inter-action which benefit different social and cultural groups?
- Are we inviting the creativity of others to spur the progress of our work?
- Who are the key partners that we need to work with in order to facilitate organisational culture change and deepen understanding of those we have traditionally excluded?
- Besides enjoyment and entertainment, do we enrich and inspire?

How can we facilitate the continuation of living heritage activities through the provision of sites or resources - for example can we run a programme of cultural celebrations in our grounds?

- Can the imaginative use of our site lend itself to building connections or re-discovery of heritage for the cultural groups in our community?
- How can we build relationships with cultural groups to release the hidden heritage embodied in the communities around us? Ways of seeing, thinking and doing which can assist us all in our search for a better future?
- In a country dominated by a peacetime interpretation of people and nature, how can we consciously strengthen values which protect world peoples and the world environment within an unstable world?

A way of seeing and a way of working

Ethnic communities are part and parcel of British society. The history of Britain is a multi-cultural history. Ethnic groups are inextricably linked to the fact of Britain. The denial of the full status of being British persons to ethnic communities has caused enormous suffering and damaged the lives of many ethnic persons. The denial of the

role of ethnic persons have played has caused much anguish. We have laid down our lives and fought wars in the name of Britain. There is a social and human debt to be paid.

Beyond that, ethnic groups wish to be able to look forward to participating within British society within a framework that allows us to make our full contribution to multi-cultural Britain.

All of us, at times, wish to act, but feel lost as to where to begin. As part of our commitment to cross-sectorial work, BEN pledges its welcome and support to you in your exploration of a vision for your entry into multi-cultural interpretation.

Our success has been based on welcoming those of goodwill and allowing ourselves to be facilitators and enablers for others, supporting them in achieving the contacts and skills in order to work effectively with and for other people whose country of origin is not Britain. For, very early on we recognised the fact that stimulating interest among ethnic communities would be futile if, when that interest materialised, there was nothing to meet it effectively within the professionalised organisations which dealt with the environment.

We aim to support the organisations within the heritage sector to move towards multi-cultural interpretation. We believe in the power of goodwill within this sector.

A structure for change within organisations

Much of the context for putting multi-cultural interpretation into place, and its contribution to inclusiveness through physical and intellectual access would come under the banner of Equal Opportunities. The following proposes an ideal situation whereby senior commitment releases resources and supports personnel through a developmental programme.

- Commitment to equal opportunities at a senior level
 - Putting Policy and Strategy into place
- Commitment of resources
 - Monetary resources and personnel time
- Commitment to organisational culture change
 - Awareness raising and the promotion of understanding at all levels of the organisation
 - An atmosphere and framework within which equal opportunities can be implemented
 - Facilitation of contact between personnel and ethnic groups
- Commitment to personnel development
 - Training and developmental programme to enable personnel to acquire the understanding and skills to work effectively
- Commitment to a framework for action
 - Allocating personnel time within work programmes
 - Identifying and setting targets
 - Provision of personnel support
 - Undertaking analysis and research which enable input by ethnic groups, with a view to identifying the focus for effective input by a participation organisation

However, change can proceed through individuals within organisations as well. Individual workers interested in working with ethnic groups to develop aspects of multi-cultural interpretation can join external networks such as BEN, and enable their organisation to come into contact with an inclusive way of thinking and innovative ways of creating new opportunities for participation. They can, through their own pieces of work, inspire change by example within an organisation.

For example, BEN has developed projects which combine the re-discovery of aspects of heritage related to the country of origin of a group of ethnic young people with outdoor activities which make imaginative use of British landscape features in a National Park. The project also addressed the claiming of Welsh culture as part of their identity as British citizens.

We look forward to supporting the emergence of the power of this goodwill within the heritage sector as a social force, no longer dormant but vibrant in action. All organisations are powerbases, which can choose whether they wish to pull their weight with respect to social change. Many have already positioned themselves within their hearts. Let the action begin.

This paper was produced by BEN to coincide with the "Whose Heritage" Conference, Manchester, Nov'99. It was commissioned by the Heritage Lottery Fund as a contribution to the debate on Access to Heritage