

Debate on the Historic Environment

Scottish Parliament, 11 March 2004



The Historic Environment: worth caring for, worth investing in

BRIEFING NOTE from the LINK/BEFS Historic Environment Review Taskforce¹

Taken for granted

IMAGINE a Scotland without our castles and great gardens; without our fine streetscapes and historic burghs; without the farms and fields that are the framework for the landscape. Imagine not commemorating our great battles where they happened, or not caring about our ancient and more recent archaeology. Would people still come in their tens of millions to visit? Would businesses still relocate to Scotland because of the high quality of life? Would local people still feel such a strong bond with their historic roots?

To a greater or lesser extent, all of these aspects of our historic environment are under threat of change, so do we invest enough to care for our heritage in relation to the enormous amount we get out – in **economic** terms from tourism and attracting jobs, but also in **social** terms in contributing to quality of life and, at a fundamental level, in terms of what it means to be Scottish?

A Historic Environment Review

An assessment of the historic environment published in 2001² concluded that we are not doing nearly enough to avoid unacceptable levels of change. There were demonstrably too few resources available to do what was needed to address a wide variety of issues, from local government capacity, to deficiencies in our designation systems, to educational capacity. The conclusion was that we needed a wide-ranging, independent review of the historic environment. Since then, the LINK/BEFS Historic Environment Review Taskforce (HERT) has been working to justify and achieve that aim.

A timely series of meetings on this subject were held in February 2004³. Fifty participants contributed to these events, which included 12 workshops looking at specific areas and groups of issues. Initial views coming out of these meetings are reinforcing the points made in the 2001 Audit:

- Historic environment interests are chronically under-resourced in **local government**, leading to ill-informed development control decisions, but also wasting the opportunities for enhancing local community and tourist interest.
- The enormous potential of the historic environment is not being realised in the **curriculum** – especially at secondary level.
- This critically important environmental factor is being ignored at **community** level, because local people often don't know enough about or understand the value of the historic environment.

- We are chronically short of **measurable facts** about the values of the historic environment, in contrast to the situation in England, where significant resources are being invested in collecting and analysing data.
- The strong links are not being recognised between the historic environment and key **government policy** concerns of education, health, crime, social justice, and particularly sustainable development, which draws together these and other fundamental issues.
- This is a complex, often inter-related subject, which needs to be looked into at a strategic level as well as exploring individual issues: the case still stands for a broad **Review** of the historic environment, backed up by a regular **Audit** to measure progress.

We are now working out how best to take forward a Review, building on the extensive work done or underway in England and in Wales, but also looking specifically at what is happening in Scotland if we feel that there are significant differences. Our experience so far shows that all the major stakeholders are willing and able to engage in this process, and to invest their precious resources into it. We hope the Scottish Executive will be prepared to make a similar level of commitment to taking forward the Review and Audit.

In May 2004 we intend to submit our case to Ministers, politicians and the public. This will outline the scope of a Review, and propose how it should be carried out. A Review will need a significant though proportionate investment of money, and will not be a once-and-for-all process, but it will surely be worth it to safeguard this fundamentally important part of our lives.

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¹ HERT is a joint taskforce of the two bodies that represent Scotland's environmental NGOs: LINK - Scottish Environment LINK (www.scotlink.org) and BEFS – The Built Environment Forum Scotland (www.befs.org.uk).

² Dr Carol Swanson, 2001, *The Historic Environment*, Scottish Environment LINK Environment Audits 4.

³ The scoping process for a Historic Environment Review has been funded by BEFS, with a contribution from the National Trust for Scotland. The results of the three Scoping Meetings are scheduled to be posted on the BEFS website by the end of March 2004.