

OPENING DOORS - EDUCATION AND THE HISTORIC HOUSE

TALK FOR HISTORIC HOUSES ASSOCIATION, 15 November 2005

Giles Waterfield

The title for my talk derives from a report called *Opening Doors: Learning and the Historic Environment*, which I edited and which was published in 2004. This was an ambitious project to survey educational activities at all levels in Britain and in Ireland today. It was originally intended to focus on country houses but the project steadily expanded to include a wide variety of historic sites. In addition to the survey it made a number of recommendations.

The survey was sponsored by the Attingham Trust, a charitable trust founded in 1952 to organise intensive study tours of country houses in Britain, at a time when very little was known about them in the US. It has now expanded to include an annual summer school for the Royal Collection. My own experience of teaching for the Attingham Trust encouraged me to investigate how the enjoyment and understanding of historic buildings and their contents in depth, an extraordinarily rich experience for the initiated, could be extended to broader audiences.

What I am saying today is to some extent based on the research carried out by my colleagues and me for this project, which I have tried to bring up to date. I want to talk briefly about the background to educational activities in historic houses in the past and today, and to suggest ways in which these activities are developing. Education is perhaps a rather off-putting word, and the educational or learning experience should be taken to include a wide range of activities and pleasures. Above all I would like to emphasise the enormous amount that country houses have to offer to audiences of all sorts. Their healthy survival in a form that is recognisable to us today must depend to a considerable extent on the ability of those who own and manage them to adapt to changing publics and expectations.

We are all I think familiar with the traditional style of country house interpretation: the guide and the guidebook. When I say traditional I don't mean that both the printed and the human guide can be rather advanced in years - I mean that these have long offered the stable form of interpretation. Guidebooks go back to the early 18th century at Wilton

where lists of the sculpture and the paintings were issued in the 1720s, while the first regular visits to country houses were recorded by Samuel Pepys and Celia Fiennes in the late seventeenth century. The guidebook has gone through a long history of changes from the austere list of contents of the early versions to the present handsome publication complete with family history and when appropriate photographs of owners, accompanied sometimes by children and always by Labradors . Equally the human guide has changed from the often dismal housekeepers who provided reams of inaccurate information for visitors - through these changes have not always been as complete as one might hope.

Since the 1960s a new type of ubiquitous activity has emerged: the Mobcap Syndrome. This involves - to put it simply - dressing children up in period costume and making them bake cakes. Wildly successful and inspiring as this approach has been in the past and continues to be in many cases, it can become a rather easy way of dealing with the interpretation of historic houses. The question that the critics of Living History pose is: how far do these activities actually teach children about the places and the periods they are supposedly learning about? The question particularly applies when the attempt to enter the past is constantly interrupted by references to current television programmes in what I regard as a mistaken effort to engage youthful audiences which underestimates their potential to make leaps of the imagination.

What is clear is how far we have come in this field in the past twenty years. Whereas as late as the 1970s bodies such as the National Trust hardly made any provision for education other than through the traditional forms of guide, education is now central to its work. The expansion of this field within English Heritage and Historic Scotland (though for some mysterious reason not CADW, the equivalent body in Wales) as well as the National Trust for Scotland, has been reflected in recent years by the work of the Historic Houses Association. Always responsive to the mood of the times, the HHA has been expanding its work in this field through its collaboration with English Heritage and the Black Environment Network, and as you have just heard its expansion is continuing.

In theory education is at the top of the agenda everywhere. Let me give you some examples of what is going on in the historic house field.

HAREWOOD HOUSE

Family trust - large scale - highly varied - work in Bird Garden and grounds - house and below stairs - archaeology at Harewood - slavery - archives - contemporary art exhibitions

CHATSWORTH and other Devonshire houses incl. Bolton Abbey, Lismore Castle and Eastbourne - trust - long happy relationship with the public - recent plans announced include the outdoor (all forms of land use and gardens), buildings and collections to expand past provision (NB plumbing and seamstresses) and involve new audiences such as Youth Groups, city dwellers, special interest groups and ethnic minority groups - they are expanding links with Local Education Authorities and Education Business Partnerships - working closely with teachers and National Curriculum.

ASTON HALL, Birmingham - in deprived area - long tradition of educational provision - current application to Heritage Lottery Fund - involvement of the community in the estate and house

CULZEAN CASTLE - variety of approaches - estate and castle handled together - 18,000 school children p.a. - not work sheets but feeling for the whole environment - history, art and architecture, geography, science, biology and conservation management - stables. The staff stress the importance of linking education with heritage management and conservation. At same time, Culzean has been the subject of intensive research by Michael Moss, uncovering the story of generations of reworking Robert Adam interiors through the nineteenth century. Fine example of the holistic approach to an estate recognising the obvious but too often ignored intimate relationship between the house and its setting

LEIGHTON HOUSE, London - re-evaluation of the collections called Revisiting Collections) has taken place, to see what they can mean to a diverse audience, and providing better information about objects for all users audio - collaboration between curators/ education/front of house staff of house -artist in residence working with the Islamic collections.

The picture is not always so rosy. There is a great deal of good will, but strictly limited resources. For our report my colleague Alan Kirwan carried out a survey of properties which claimed to offer an education service - and I should stress that this survey applied to a wide range of building types, and not just country houses, though these were an important element. He found that while around three quarters of the sites employed full-time staff with at least some responsibility for educational

work, half of the total provided budgets of less than £1,000 per annum, and only 17% had budgets of over £10,000. The average salary for the education officer was between £15,000 and £18,000, well below most salaries in schools. Because of the shortage of funds, a high proportion of staff time was spent in making grant applications to a great number of funding bodies with diverse requirements and procedures, which were in themselves sometimes difficult to identify. Only 13% of our sites offered a purpose-built education space, and our visits revealed a depressing picture of what Alan calls 'cramped and uninspiring rooms' of a type which may be familiar to some of you from other people's houses - that dark damp room in the stables with an indefinable smell (probably highly historic) in the corner, for which it was impossible to think of any other use. While many properties have web sites, these tend to be primarily factual, offering basic information about access to the site without much guidance as to how the place can be understood and enjoyed, particularly by teachers. Schools, and particularly primary schools, were generally the chief beneficiaries of education programmes. Secondary schools - on the occasions when they could be persuaded to visit, and there is a problem there - were often offered almost identical versions of what had been prepared for the very young, and the same applied in many cases to adult groups. And of course there is the perennial problem of the National Curriculum - which forces great Georgian houses to force themselves into the straitjacket of pretending that they are Tudor or Victorian. It seems as though the Department For Education and Skills is finally addressing the problem of the Curriculum and the impact it makes: last week they published a consultation paper called 'Education Outside the Classroom' and are asking for feedback on future policy decisions. They have stressed their interest in the responses of the heritage sector, and no doubt the HHA will be involved in this process.

In a broader context we found that the sector was very fragmented, with little communication between different branches - for example between churches and historic houses, or industrial sites. This seemed to apply both at local level, so that historic sites within striking distance of one another tended not to share their resources, and at national level - even though English Heritage has tried hard to encourage such collaboration within historic houses and places of worship. In the museum field, museum professionals are able to communicate both through a professional body, the Museums Association, and through specialist subject groups including GEM, the Group for Education in Museums. Nothing similar exists, as far as I know, within the historic buildings environment. A related problem - and it's one that the HHA is trying to address - is that when the owners of historic properties as it might be a

parish church or a manor house, wish to provide educational activities, it is hard for them to know how to set about doing this. There is no obvious source of information or help, so far at least.

Many of these problems are due to the question of unlimited responsibilities and severely limited budgets. There is a huge disparity between the amount we spend on keeping our historic buildings and the amount we spend on helping the people for whom they are being saved - both today and in the future - to enjoy and understand them.

One difficulty that at the moment country houses are not very fashionable. In the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the exhibition at V and A and such crucial publications as Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* - plus some high profile crises such as Kedleston and Calke Abbey - country houses became extremely popular. This popularity applied both at an academic level and at a more general level, as shown in the great exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington on the English country house. This is no longer the case. At one level, applications to the Paul Mellon Centre for funding - a very good measure of changing tastes in academic research - reveal a decline in academic interest in country houses. As you know visitor figures are gradually dwindling in many properties except for gardens due to a number of factors including the decline in tourism - traditional audiences familiar with the whole value system getting older - competition from other attractions and the range of activities available on a Sunday, not at all the case in the past. The expanding urban public in many cases feel remote from the countryside and everything it represents, notably the country houses that appear to embody the values of the past (however much they in fact have to offer today). Though I can only rely on anecdotal evidence here, I think it's fair to say that in a climate when traditional values are constantly under question, the systems of privilege, hierarchy and authority which country houses appear to represent are not necessarily to the public's taste.

One crucial factor may be - and I offer this rather hesitantly - that with a few exceptions there have not been any major country house crises in recent years, in the way there were in the 1970s and 1980s. When Tyntesfield came along, it was interesting to see how positively the public and the press reacted, and how well the news of the purchase for the National Trust was received. There seems to be a general view that country houses are chugging along all right and that give or take some attic sales they are secure for the future. But all these factors may explain why it has been so difficult to find the funding that it is needed to help

country houses to present themselves in the way they deserve to be and need to be if they are to survive as a subject of popular affection.

In many ways, however, the picture is changing, and I want to outline some of the most interesting current developments.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS:

1. Governmental developments:

A working party brought together by the DCMS and the DfES has been consulting over the needs of the heritage sector in the educational field.

This group

is now preparing a proposal for a project (supported by CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and English Heritage) called Engaging Places. This will advocate the benefits of learning and education in the built environment to a wide audience.

If Ministers agree, Engaging Places will realise the recommendations of both their working party and the Attingham Trust survey for a resource centre, or one stop shop, for education in the built environment, which can pull the sector together to take a holistic strategic approach to learning and education, that is to say historic AND contemporary.

A response is expected before Christmas. May sound dry but has great potential - something that we have been agitating for for a long time.

(HHA - This will be out of date shortly, I hope, so if you are publishing this in due course we should update it).

2. Funding: For example, the HLF is becoming more involved in funding educational activities in historic buildings, including privately owned properties. At Burghley House, which is run by a trust, the HLF has granted £1 million towards the highly ambitious and exciting plans to create a new learning centre, the Brewhouse Centre at a cost of £2.7 million. The Centre which will contain a new visitors' centre, an interactive interpretation room, an exhibition space and two dedicated teaching rooms, as well as a sculpture garden, and will include such exciting features as a high-tech Ancestors' Attic with virtual recreations of past inhabitants. The education centre will be run by its own professional staff and will offer a whole range of activities. As the trust puts its case, very persuasively, 'We feel it is important that Burghley is not seen as a museum of historical relics, or as an art gallery, but rather that it continues as a living vibrant place'

For private owners, grants from the HLF are limited to £50,000 : recently Doddington Hall in Lincolnshire which has active plans to expand access for the particularly sighted, the elderly and other groups, has received an HLF grant of £49,800. The problem of funding is by no means solved but since the HLF will continue in the foreseeable future to distribute large sums for educational programmes, this is an encouraging development.

3. Research and academic activities.

One of the most interesting recent developments among the owners and managers of country houses is in the field of research and higher education. The tendency here is to concentrate less on architecture and the artistic contents of houses - which was the main preoccupation of scholars up to the 1970s - and more on the social background. Country houses, which historically, and now, are connected with a wide range of activities and interests, are particularly suited to the kind of contextual approach that spans several subjects. Such an approach is in particular favour at the moment with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the leading official funding body for university research in the humanities and very interested in collaboration between universities and other bodies.

An outstanding example of the constructive use of archives, material evidence and oral information is the Yorkshire Country Houses Partnership of seven houses led by Castle Howard and York University. In 2004 the Partnership initiated exhibitions on the theme of Mistresses and Maids in each house. The success of this partnership lay in its ability to bring together the research resources of the history department of York University with the curators at each of these houses, to explore the collections (including many objects previously not considered worth showing to the public, being too intimate and small) and archives of the houses - to their mutual benefit. This partnership is currently planning to repeat the success of this experiment with a programme of exhibitions and activities on the theme of estates, in 2007: the exhibitions will look at the estate 'as a populated working community intimately linked to the big house'. And that's not all - four of the houses are working on a 'Year of the Portrait' project next summer, to celebrate the relaunch of Beningborough, as well as a conference at the university, possibly on the theme of the country house at war. Indispensable in these activities, and I think pretty original, is the close collaboration between the houses and the university.

At Arundel Castle, John Martin Robinson, the Librarian, on behalf of the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk and supported by the Paul Mellon Centre, has organised a series of study days looking at various aspects of the house. These study days, at present aimed at experts in the field, could be adapted to the crucial audience of passionate amateurs, the volunteers and members of decorative and fine art societies who make up an important element of the country house public, and without whose support many houses would be unable to function.

The sort of academic and research-based activities I have outlined are not, I suggest, only of interest to scholars - an energetic search for the understanding of the history and contents of the historic houses can lead to results which makes sense of gardens, rooms and objects which otherwise have been divorced from their original meaning, and can inspire visitors at all levels.

4. IRELAND

I would like to mention also the work that is being carried out in the Republic of Ireland by the indefatigable Dr Terence Dooley who following his 2003 report on the future of Irish houses has set up an institute for their study and preservation, based at the National University of Ireland at Maynooth. The institute holds annual conferences and works to preserve and foster what in Ireland in particular is an endangered species. As Dooley has stated, 'Houses should be regarded as an educational asset, offering a unique insight into the country's social, economic, cultural and political history as well as the architectural heritage which they represent.' His vision for the future of these houses has proved fruitful. As of last week, there has been a significant change in Government policy towards the historic house. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government announced the formation of a group to advise on the governance of the Irish Heritage Trust, a body that will receive public funding and will act 'as an extension to the existing state measures in support of the nation's heritage...with a mandate to acquire for public access major heritage properties where the State does not wish to acquire them directly and there is imminent risk to their heritage value.'

5. NEW TECHNOLOGY

Web sites was an aspect that we considered at some length in Opening Doors. Our researcher found that though many historic properties had web sites most of these offered basic information, and that very few - outside some examples organised by the National Trust and English

Heritage - explored the potential for helping and stimulating teachers and others contemplating a visit to a historic site.

One aspect of interpretation we did not consider in our report is the audio tour - a means of communication which has been functioning for at least forty years but until recently has been used primarily in museums and especially temporary exhibitions. It is my impression that audio guides are still relatively little used in country houses. English Heritage has been offering them for some years in their properties with great success, and in the past two years they have been applied by the Royal Collection to the difficult problem of interpreting Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle, filled as they often are with huge numbers of visitors with differing demands and interests. At Buckingham Palace in particular one of the main messages of the audio tour is the way the palace is used today, a matter of importance both to the visitor and to the Royal Household, which needs to communicate the fact that this is a working building used for a variety of purposes, and not just a set of imposing rooms. For me one of the most successful recent audio tours is the one created at the Workhouse at Southwell - rather the reverse of Buckingham Palace - where the visitor is given a tour of the building in the form of a little play in which a gentleman is taken round the building and exposed to some troubling events, a brilliantly imaginative and evocative way of animating a succession of empty and dour rooms.

Now that audio tours are much more flexible than they used to be, allowing visitors to choose their own route and easily changed, they are increasingly suitable for use in country houses. The ability of the audio tour to provide a personal experience for the visitor and to recreate the sounds and voices that would be heard in a historic building - the music, sound effects, original recordings, snatches of dialogue - is the most effective way of integrating this aspect of the sites' identity within the viewer's experience. The auditor is also very effective in that they offer flexibility - while visitors may enjoy dramatic enjoyments, these impose time constraints which certainly do not suit everyone. And it has the major advantage of not necessitating any aesthetic compromises or damage to the visual authenticity of a site, in contrast to the label or text panel.

6. OLD TECHNOLOGY - GUIDING

Not for a moment would I wish to be disparaging about traditional guides who at their best offer enthusiasm, welcome and knowledge in a way that is not really available from a machine. In writing our report we found

some fine examples of good guiding, usually dependent on a high quality of training which can be self-motivated as at Downe House in Kent, Charles Darwin's house now run by English Heritage, where the body of guides runs an impressive programme of lectures for themselves and are consumed by lively curiosity and enthusiasm for the house and everything to do with it. But I have to say that guides and room stewards are not in my experience always as well trained as they might be - that the opening statement 'This is not a museum, it is a family home' can be overdone, and that retailing inaccurate information is more common than one might wish. Good training for guides, in terms of both information and ways of communicating with visitors so that they don't feel patronised and are given a chance to say what they are interested in finding out at the beginning of a visit, is a particularly effective and not necessarily expensive way of improving the visitor's experience. One way forward may be closer links between historic houses and the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies. NADFAS already offers a range of services to country houses but as a group of people with a dedicated interest in attending monthly lectures on the fine and decorative arts, there is surely scope for extending the work of NADFAS members beyond their current work into becoming trained guides at the highest level, the Blitzkrieg of the guiding movement. In a rather different vein, it is worth mentioning the Mentoring scheme being pioneered at the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, where teenagers are trained to take round their peers, that is to say other teenagers, with the aim of removing the barrier of instruction from one's elders.

7. RETHINKING WAYS OF LOOKING

Living History represented a major advance but the time has come for new approaches. A very new approach is being taken at Tyntesfield House which is currently working out its education strategy. Here the National Trust are investigating, in a way that has not been explored in such detail before, what the people living round about, and particularly in nearby Bristol, are interested in. They are addressing the fact that visitors are fascinated by how historic houses operate, and in the case of Tyntesfield how a building on such a scale can be restored, so that in place of the traditional NT approach of showing a recently acquired property, pristine after restoration, visitors will observe every stage in its refurbishment. They use the term Conservation in Action, revealing the mechanics of the country estate, creating schemes for apprentices working in and outside the house, and allowing the public access to the conservation work and explaining why such conservation is needed

On balance, there is much reason for encouragement. I am very aware, however, that all the examples I have chosen represent larger houses, often with quite considerable resources behind them as well as full-time staffing. For the smaller house things are not so easy, unless they are part of a local authority museum service, though it is often the smaller houses that visitors most enjoy and where they feel at home. It's in this area that partnerships and easily accessible sources of funding are particularly needed, and it's here that the Historic Houses Association has an especially important role to play. Following its initiatives in the past few years in collaboration with English Heritage and the Black Environment Network, it's extremely encouraging to hear that the HHA is advancing its work on education in the future through its admirable Education Officer and now through two highly experienced advisers, John Hamer and Jenny Fordham.

Finally - why is education so important?

I would suggest that this is a particularly exciting moment, a moment when heritage is in a positive way being redefined to mean not just bricks and mortar pre-1900 but a much wider range of memories and traditions from the past and even the recent present. This new approach is reflected in the way people look at country houses and the people who lived in them.

Education may appear to be a 'socially useful' obligation, particularly under the impact of the DCMS and the HLF. An educational component in many projects, often measured in narrow mechanistic terms, can be imposed as a duty - with museums and other historic sites being required to fulfil certain joyless objectives and achieve numbers of outcomes and outputs. But it can, and should be, much more than that.

Education in the sense of opening people's eyes to what these houses meant and mean - understanding them as fully as possible - exploring all the messages and stories that they contain - should not be an irksome duty but a pleasure and pleasure, enormously fulfilling and rewarding. It can be applied at all levels, not just at primary school level but for adults and for academics. **GATEWAY PROJECT** It can be achieved in all sorts of ways, whatever suits the historic site and the audience and not least the people who look after the house. That's the challenge and the opportunity of the future, and as one would expect this is a challenge that the HHA is embracing.

