





# English Heritage: A Brief History

## The Creation of English Heritage

The state's legal responsibility for the historic environment can be traced back to the Ancient Monuments Act of 1882. Over the next 100 years central government developed and refined systems of heritage protection, introducing listing for buildings after the war and conservation areas in the 1960s. Local government has always played the key role in making conservation decisions locally.

In the early 1980s, Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, proposed that national responsibility for the historic environment should be passed to a semi-autonomous agency or 'quango' that would be able to operate with greater efficiency and enterprise, but under ministerial guidelines and to government policy. Consequently, in 1984, the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission – or to use its less formal name, 'English Heritage' – was created to secure the preservation and enhancement of the man-made heritage of England for the benefit of future generations, and to directly manage the sites and monuments taken into state care since the 1880s.

Photograph: The Grade I listed former Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras station in London has been returned to its former glory after a long and complicated restoration. English Heritage has worked closely with the owner Manhattan Loft Corporation and architects RHWL and Richard Griffiths to preserve as many of the original features as possible, giving advice and guidance throughout the project.

## Early Achievements – the 1980s

- Free **educational visits** introduced
- Major conservation success in saving **Acton Court**, a Tudor manor house north of Bristol which had suffered centuries of neglect. English Heritage acquires it, restores it and returns it to the nation as an independent museum
- Definition of the historic environment broadens and **twentieth-century listing** is introduced – Jodrell Bank Observatory, the Royal Festival Hall and, later, Centre Point, both in London, and Park Hill council estate in Sheffield are listed
- In 1989 English Heritage wins a major battle to persuade developers to give archaeologists time to investigate and protect the newly-discovered remains of the **Rose Theatre**

## Broadening Support for Heritage – the 1990s

- **Cathedral Grants Scheme introduced** in 1991 following a comprehensive survey into repair needs. In total, £52.3 million is awarded through this scheme by 2009
- **Conservation Area Partnership grant schemes (CAPs)** are introduced in 1993 to regenerate historic areas

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- A 1994 dig on a quarry site near Chichester, Sussex, unearths **Boxgrove Man**, the earliest human remains in Europe. English Heritage funds the dig and spends over £1 million on research and site preservation
- **Eltham Palace** in London is restored to its former medieval and art deco glory in 1994
- **The Joint Places of Worship Scheme** is introduced in 1996, successfully supporting urgent repair projects to all listed places of worship in England, continuing through its successor scheme, Repair Grants for Places of Worship in England, both funded jointly with the Heritage Lottery Fund
- The plight of historic buildings whose owners can no longer afford their upkeep leads to the introduction of the **Buildings at Risk Register** in 1998. This highlights the vulnerability of thousands of Grade I and II\* buildings and scheduled monuments across England
- In 2000 English Heritage publishes **Power of Place**, which promotes the idea of heritage as being all around us
- In 2002 English Heritage produces **The State of the Historic Environment**, a first-ever national audit which becomes an annual benchmark to measure how the nation is caring for its heritage
- English Heritage acquires responsibility for **historic wrecks** and submerged landscapes within 12 miles of the English coast
- Over **£21 million is invested in improving facilities for visitors** at English Heritage properties including Helmsley, Pendennis and Dover Castles, Osborne House and Battle Abbey
- **Apethorpe Hall**, a Grade I listed country house of exceptional importance, is saved for the nation in 2004. English Heritage undertakes a £4 million programme of emergency repairs in preparation for returning it to private hands
- The **Inspired! campaign** to tackle the problems facing England's 14,500 historic places of worship is launched in 2006. The size of the challenge is identified – a yearly repair and maintenance bill is estimated at £185 million – and support given to congregations of all faith groups with listed buildings
- **Silbury Hill**, part of the Avebury World Heritage Site, is stabilised for future generations in a delicate and complex operation during 2007/08

### An Organisation for the New Millennium

- As the new millennium starts, English Heritage launches a project through which over 4,000 volunteers photograph all the listed buildings and structures in England leading to an **online digital library of 370,000 entries**, [imagesofengland.org.uk](http://imagesofengland.org.uk)

- **Conservation Principles** is launched in April 2008, which for the first time sets out the principles and policies that guide English Heritage's approach to conservation
- Demolition of part of **Smithfield market** in London is stopped at a public inquiry in 2008. The inquiry concludes that buildings which have been identified as interesting, whatever the designation or Grade, should be retained unless there is very good reason not to do so
- The buildings and archive of **J W Evans and Sons**, a family silversmith business in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, are saved for the nation thanks to a £2 million English Heritage project
- Over ten years of effort comes to fruition with the spectacular restoration and extension of **St Pancras station**, the terminus of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link
- A £3.1 million restoration of **Westminster Abbey's Chapter House** is completed in 2010, the most concentrated programme of works since Sir George Gilbert Scott's restoration in the 19th century
- **The English Heritage Foundation**, an independent charitable body, is set up in 2011 to raise money for the National Heritage Collection in English Heritage's care
- The **National Heritage List for England (NHLE)** launches in May 2011, providing access to up to date information on all nationally designated heritage assets. The new online database not only maps where places are but in many cases gives detailed descriptions of their special architectural or historic interest
- A major new visitor experience opens at **Dover Castle** in June 2011. The new displays in the same historic tunnels from which the 'Operation Dynamo' rescue operation was masterminded re-create the drama of the Dunkirk evacuation
- In 2011 the first phase of a 20-year restoration project to revive one of Britain's most important gardens at **Wrest Park** in Bedfordshire is completed, following the award of a £1.14 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant

## Conclusion

In the early 1980s the historic environment was much more narrowly defined than it is today and there was little recognition of its vast social and economic potential. English Heritage has been crucial in broadening recognition of the historic environment as a whole and in helping people to understand, value, care for and enjoy it.