

# KEEPING MEANING IN THE LANDSCAPE: COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP AND THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

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[SLIDE TITLE]

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be here today to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and to talk about its contribution to the historic environment. Where better to talk about this than in the wonderful setting of Kew, which has recently been chosen as the next UK candidate for World Heritage Site status?

[SLIDE Bullets]

In the short time available to me I want to do three things. Firstly, I want to quickly re-iterate the case for the inclusion of heritage management within the objectives of agri-environment schemes, including Countryside Stewardship.

Secondly, I want to consider a few examples of good practice within Stewardship, in order to illustrate its breadth and importance in terms of heritage conservation.

Lastly, I want to consider how we can make the contribution of Stewardship - or its successor schemes - even more effective in terms of delivering heritage benefits.

## [SLIDE MONTAGE]

Before going any further, I should explain the term "*historic environment*".

In this context I refer to archaeological sites, to traditional buildings, to designated landscapes such as our great parks, and to the historical dimension which permeates every landscape, whether cherished and protected by designation or degraded by exploitation.

This term is also useful because it stresses the *holistic* nature of the environment, confirming that it embraces both the natural and the man-made - the past as well as the present. This is fully reflected in the multi-faceted character of Stewardship which is, we believe, its greatest strength. The scheme represents a good example of "joined-up" government working practically on the ground. It not only implements the policy of DEFRA and its agencies but, also achieves objectives of the Department for Culture Media and Sport and its agency, English Heritage.

English Heritage has a statutory duty to seek to conserve what is best and most valued amongst our historic assets. I must stress that this means quite the opposite from wishing to preserve the landscape "in aspic". Our landscape has always changed – that is at the root of its complexity and its fascination. I would contend that no one should understand this change in the landscape better than a historian and no one should have a greater appreciation of the need for change in the future.

[SLIDE STANWICK AND PIE CHART]

However, we can also see that spurred on by globalisation, intensification and mechanisation, the changes wrought in our countryside during the last 50 years have been greater and more damaging than those that have occurred in the last 15 centuries.

In 1995 we conducted a survey of Monuments at Risk, which examined 5% of all recorded archaeological sites in England. This showed that, since 1945, intensive agriculture has been the principal cause of unrecorded monument destruction through ploughing, drainage, and overstocking. At the time of the survey, a third of all rural field monuments were under the plough – the impact of which is illustrated by this plough-damaged mosaic from Stanwick in Northamptonshire.

Subsequent surveys by English Heritage have also highlighted the serious impact of agricultural drainage on our wetland heritage, and the devastation of the Midlands medieval landscapes as a result of the loss of both improved and unimproved grassland.

[SLIDE: STONEHENGE AP]

In this context, it is important to note that the historic environment does not enjoy similar levels of protection to those accorded to nature conservation assets under the new CROW Act and the European Habitats Directive. There is no international heritage legislation comparable to the Directive, and the

pressures which I have just described are not mitigated even by World Heritage Site designation.

For example, about a quarter of the individual nationally important monuments contained within the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site are under damaging arable cultivation, despite being part of prehistoric landscapes of iconic significance.

These losses are serious because it is the historic aspects of our landscape which give it its meaning and provide its narrative. Furthermore, our historic assets are unique, finite, and irreplaceable. Unlike threatened species they cannot be the subject of a recovery programme: unlike scarce habitats they cannot be recreated.

With these pressures acting on our historic resource it is important that we find ways of managing change in the landscape which work with the grain of its history, rather than against it. And, given the significance of intensive agriculture as one of the main agents of destruction, we regard agri-environment schemes – including stewardship – as an invaluable tool in the heritage conservation "kit bag".

**[SLIDE LETCOMBE AND MICHAEL HOWARD]**

Heritage was, however, something of a late developer in terms of the scheme. Although historic environment considerations were included from the outset of Stewardship, it was not until 1992 that this aspects was fully recognised with

the launch of a discrete "historic landscapes" option and not, indeed, until 1996 that an option for historic building restoration was added to the scheme.

The historic landscapes option was launched by the then Secretary of State for Agriculture, Michael Howard, here at Letcombe Castle in Oxfordshire. I show you site not only because it was used to launch the option, but also because this case has been an important success story.

[SLIDE LETCOMBE AP WITH TRENCHES]

Although Letcombe was a nationally important Iron Age hillfort on the popular Ridgeway footpath, before entry into the Scheme its interior was inaccessible under damaging cultivation, and its ramparts were both visually obscured by scrub and suffering serious damage from burrowing animals. Walkers crossed the monument without ever realising it was there. The hillfort's ramparts are now cleared and look extremely impressive and its chalk-grassland interior is accessible to visitors. Subsequent geophysical survey and sample excavation has confirmed that the interior is crowded with Iron Age huts and pit remains, many of which would have been obliterated by continued cultivation. Not only has this site been saved, therefore, it has also been returned to the public realm and the public consciousness.

[SLIDE: CLAYHANGER AP]

The Roman Fort at Clayhanger in Devon is another example of significant site management. Discovered in 1987 by aerial photography, this important fort survived as earthworks under arable cultivation, but was considered to be

highly vulnerable to erosion. It entered the scheme in 1999 and is now under grassland with a sustainable stocking regime.

It is important to acknowledge here that this represents a major commitment on the part of the farmer, as the area of the monument is his most productive land. Nevertheless, encouraged by Stewardship, the owner developed an interest in the site and is keen to “do the right thing”.

[SLIDE: OMBERSLEY}

Although traditional building restoration did not become part of the scheme until 1996, excellent progress has been made, with around 100 building projects delivered in the last five years: no mean feat by any measure. This illustration shows a fold-yard building at Ombersley, in Worcestershire, restored by the scheme.

Projects of this type, both within Stewardship and the Environmentally Sensitive Areas not only offer these historically interesting structures a new lease of life; they create vital employment in building and related trades, they enhance craft skills and they support the supply of authentic building materials.

[SLIDE: BRAUNTON]

The Scheme has also been successful in enhancing the management of historic landscapes such as Braunton Great Field, Near Barnstaple in Devon. The Great Field is a very rare example – one of a handful nationally – of an

intact and working medieval open field. It was never enclosed and is still divided into strip fields separated by grass boundaries and occasional marker stones. In recent years, holdings have been agglomerated and boundaries removed, with a consequent loss of historic character. In 2000, however, a Stewardship special project was established to protect and restore boundaries and promote their ecological diversity. It is too early to be sure whether the scheme will be a success but the early signs are encouraging.

[SLIDE: KNEPP PARK]

More typical landscape-scale projects relate to the restoration of historic parkland such as this one at Knepp Deer Park at West Grinstead. Work here has involved tree and boundary management and historically authentic replanting.

[SLIDE: MANAGEMENT PLAN]

A particularly significant success in terms of park restoration projects has been DEFRA's willingness to fund management plans, such as this one for Knepp Park. English Heritage and DEFRA work closely on these plans which - it is important to remember - have long-term value for landscape management long beyond the term of the Stewardship agreement. As a result of this, we believe these plans represent excellent value for money.

In the little time remaining, I want to consider some possible future developments in the way relationship between the scheme and the historic environment. I particularly want to focus on two priority areas in which there

is clear room for improvement - the provision of expert advice and scheme targeting.

Most would agree that expertise is the cornerstone of successful environmental enhancement schemes. However, it must be said that in terms of its in-house expertise, MAFF has paid limited attention to the historic environment. MAFF employed its first ecologist in, I think, 1983 and its first archaeologist – through ADAS - in 1995. The Department's decision in 2000 to increase its historic environment professionals to 5 was, therefore, very warmly welcomed by English Heritage. However, we remain concerned that this increase does not yet provide coverage in every region and - with only two in-house landscape architects - provision for heritage and landscape within DEFRA compares pretty poorly with its impressive body of 44 in-house ecologists.

Secondly, there is an important need to consider the role of local authority historic environment staff who, it must be remembered, are the principal providers of heritage advice to the agri-environment schemes. These advisers have many other duties and are finding it extremely difficult to cope with the – albeit welcome - expansion of the scheme.

As an experimental measure, therefore, English Heritage has part-funded a number of temporary posts within a selection of local authorities, mainly in the South-West, who are dedicated to the provision of expert advice to agri-environment schemes. DEFRA colleagues and other partners in the region



have reacted very favourably to this demonstration programme – noting a radical change in the quality, timeliness and proactiveness of the advice and consequent gains for heritage conservation. Unfortunately, English Heritage cannot fund these posts indefinitely, and we would like to see careful thought given in the mid-term review as to how this sort of advisory function can be sustained in the longer-term.

[SLIDE: SM @ RISK ]

Thirdly, I would like to turn to the issue of targeting. In the past, I believe that the heritage sector has made an inadequate contribution to targeting of Stewardship, principally because we have had no tools available to allow the historic environment to play a systematic part in the process.

This is now changing. English Heritage is, for example, developing a systematic “Scheduled Monument at Risk” database and also a methodology for identifying historic parks and gardens at risk. Here you can see some of the results from our East Midlands scheduled monuments at risk pilot project, showing different patterns of risk for different forms of monument at the regional level. The project also allows far more detailed analysis at the sub-regional and site specific level. Together, our Scheduled Monuments and Parks and Gardens at Risk initiatives will ensure that DEFRA and other partners are very clear which nationally important heritage sites are in greatest need of intervention.

[SLIDE SW REGIONAL HLC MAP]

In addition to this work, we are also well advanced in developing tools that function at landscape level. Our Historic Landscape Characterisation programme now covers over half of England. It complements the Countryside Agency's Landscape Character work, but works at a variety of scales from the regional – seen here for the south-west region.

[SLIDE: SOMERSET HLC MAP]

– to a very detailed level, seen here for Somerset. *This* scale of analysis will allow the targeting of landscape enhancements at a land holding and even land parcel level. It is potentially very powerful.

[SLIDE: CB 42]

Given the time available, this has had to be a whistle-stop survey of the scope of the Scheme. However, I would point out that the latest issue of English Heritage's Conservation Bulletin is devoted to rural heritage issues, including the role of the schemes in heritage conservation. These are available outside and I hope you will take the opportunity to pick up a copy. It will, I hope, put additional and more informative flesh on the bare bones of this presentation.

In the meantime English Heritage wishes Countryside Stewardship a happy 10<sup>th</sup> birthday!