

01

HERITAGE IN
REGENERATION:

INSPIRATION

OR IRRELEVANCE?

Dr Simon Thurley *Chief Executive, English Heritage*



I had better come clean at the start. I live in a port. As it happens, it is a port which was, in its time, and on a different scale, as successful as Liverpool was in its heyday. But that time is rather a long time ago now, in fact over four hundred years. In 1600 my home town of King's Lynn was amongst Britain's leading ports, bigger than Bristol in numbers of ships and with trading tentacles reaching into the Baltic and far into the Mediterranean (*Fig. 1*). Lynn's position as a port was destroyed by the railways and although it still has working docks today the tonnage that passes through is very small. Yet anyone visiting it can instantly see that this was once a port; the customs house, the old quays, the merchants houses, the big market places and the fishermen's houses all add immeasurably to Lynn's sense of place.

Fig. 1: King's Lynn, Norfolk: the historic waterfront, with the Customs House of 1683

It is this sense of place, this character, that we at English Heritage will always say that needs to be understood. For us the first and most important thing is that any developer and the relevant local authority should have a full understanding of the place in which major change is planned. Various tools have been invented over the years to try and help that process. These include characterisation, historical studies, view studies, urban analysis and more.

But does this actually make any difference? What happens to the richly illustrated historical reports produced by consultants? Are they handed to architects who then use them as their bible? Are they taken up by the planners and turned into supplementary planning guidance? Or do they just get put on a shelf? The answer is that normally it just gets forgotten because for most developers and many local authorities heritage is just a hindrance. If a report on heritage is commissioned they will have ticked

off a process that they need to say they have done, but once completed it can be set aside and everyone can get on with the business of making money.

Ipswich is an example of this. Like many ports, it has refocused its commercial hub away from the historic centre leaving a lot of land in the historic trading heart for regeneration (*Fig. 2*). The city decided to prepare what it called an Area Action Plan for the redevelopment of the historic port. This included some work on the history, archaeology and development of the area: all very useful. The process was then to take this forward to create a series of planning briefs and master plans to inform individual developments. This would reinforce general points in the action plan about storey heights, vistas and through routes as well as issues about historic character. Regrettably, this latter part was not done and what Ipswich got was lots of poorly designed high-rise flats built on a budget (*Fig. 3*). And they got it with the heritage studies still sitting on a shelf.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4

Fig.2: Ipswich, Suffolk: the historic waterfront

Fig.3: Ipswich, Suffolk: new development on the waterfront

Fig.4: Hayle, Cornwall: historic pier in the harbour

The problem is that in dealing with the regeneration of an historic port it is often very hard to convince people that these sort of studies are relevant. This is because, I suggest, we are not asking the right questions of them. The overwhelmingly important question and one that is not asked often enough is: what is it that we are actually preserving?

English Heritage has recently developed a methodology to answer that crucial question under four headings. The first thing that we are trying to save is very often the *physical evidence* of the shipping industry. This may not be beautiful to look and will almost certainly have no beneficial use. It might be a series of dockside cranes, or just the raw physicality of the dock engineering at places like Hayle in Cornwall (Fig.4). The reason for wanting to keep this is that it provides evidence of our past achievements in engineering, architecture and design: it has, if you like evidential value, the potential for giving us evidence about our past.

The second reason for preserving part of our port heritage is for what it tells us about our history. My own town is a perfect example of a place that could not be understood without understanding that it was once a great port. The streets of merchants houses, the two market places the long quays, the three churches – two of which are virtually the size of a cathedral. The physical remains of the port; the docksides, the customs house, all tell a story, the loss of which would impoverish the town. The third reason is the pure aesthetics of what we have. This may be in the raw sublime beauty of massive structures such as the extraordinary hydraulic tower at Grimsby Docks, Lincolnshire, designed to look like a campanile in Tuscany, or perhaps the more quirky, ephemeral and picturesque net sheds at Whitstable, Kent (Figs.5 & 6).

Fig.5: the hydraulic dock tower at Grimsby, built in 1851-2 (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

Fig.6: the fish dock at Whitstable, Kent, with timber-clad net sheds (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

Lastly there is sometimes an argument that we should keep some of our port heritage because it means something to the people who still live there. In short, it is valued for the memories of the generations that it contains. In itself it might not be beautiful, important or historical, but it might be a landmark that captures the reason why it is important to people. To take an example, the mariners' church in Gloucester Docks, built in the 1840s, still has an evangelical congregation but perhaps more importantly still embodies the life that went on in the docks before they closed. Not a great architectural treasure in itself, it represents a great deal for the people who live there (Fig.7).

Fig.7: the Mariners' Church, Gloucester Docks, dwarfed by the enormous warehouses

Of course these categories are not mutually exclusive. The wonderful warehouses of Gloucester Docks should be kept for all four reasons: their value is far more than any one of these and is, in fact, an amalgamation of all four.

So a way to get closer to what is important is not just understanding the history of a place, useful and important though that is. It is all about understanding what is valuable about it. We sometimes will call this understanding the significance of a place. Once you have identified significance it is possible to be much more specific about what you really want from a new development in an old place. The crucial stage beyond understanding is asking specific questions about how and why a place might be important.

The first question about evidential value will often, but not always, be answered by statutory designation. The purpose of listing, not only in this country but across Europe, is to identify what has special interest, in terms of technological advances,

stylistic innovation, association with great architects, engineers or patrons. The question that is asked is 'is this a leading example and is it an intact example?' But many European countries have a two-tier system, with a national list which points out high evidential value nationally and a local list capturing different values. In this country we are on the verge of encouraging more local listing as a more intense local consideration of what is important. So settling on what is of evidential value is not as simple as looking it up in a list of nationally important structures. It must involve a scrutiny of what might be important locally too.

To a degree this part of assessing significance is empirical. Of course there are arguments at the margins but the only surviving treadmill dockside crane at Harwich is now a scheduled ancient monument and of clear importance (Fig.8). The same to a lesser degree applies to historical value. Generally it is possible to make a case for this that can be agreed. The Liverpool World Heritage Site is just such a case (Fig.9). Thus in assessing the significance of ports evidential and historical value can usually be fairly easily discerned.



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10

Fig.8: the medieval harbour crane at Harwich, Essex (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

Fig.9: the Liverpool waterfront from the air (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

Fig.10: the River Thames at Battersea Power Station: cranes unloaded coal from barges in the river (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

The arguments come with aesthetic and communal value. One man's sublimity is another's abomination. One person's picturesqueness is another's chaos. The values change. Evidential and historical values change too, but less quickly. Aesthetic values can enjoy a turnaround in less than a generation. The cranes on the river front at Battersea Power Station in London were due to be swept away in most of the schemes for the redevelopment of the site which have been put forward over the last few years (Fig.10). However in the recent schemes they are regarded as being an ornament to the site. I agree; but I'm not sure that I would have done when I first saw them in the early 1980s. My taste has changed too.

One of the issues that has dominated the regeneration of Bristol harbour side is the appearance of the new buildings. This is partly about how people respond to the aesthetics of new developments. What is clear is that much of what has been built has been unpopular because people believe that it has not captured sufficiently well the history and character of the place (Fig.11). So this suggests that there can be a broad consensus about what constitutes successful development that preserves aesthetic values. The trick for planning authorities is finding a way to capture it. The same goes for the equally elusive communal values. The dock against which the *SS Empire Windrush* berthed at Tilbury in 1948 and where the first group of post-war immigrants from the West Indies disembarked may have strong communal values for that particular ethnic community. It may have no meaning for other people.

Fig. 11: the regenerated harbour at Bristol

Yet despite these issues of subjectivity it is usually possible to identify the values of a port and perhaps ascribe significance to it. Parts of this process will be easier than others, but it is possible to do. So what happens next?

The influence of this work on assessing value and significance can be very variable. Two examples, Lowestoft, Suffolk, and Hartlepool, County Durham, illustrate this. In Lowestoft, a road scheme typical of its age was built in the 1970s with a multi-storey car park on the fringes of the residential quarter but in the old port. I don't know whether there was a report written, but clearly the planners were determined that the car park should preserve some of the historic character of the old port. The Suffolk coastal towns are characterised by the use of flintwork, normally knapped as a facing material. So someone thought if they were to develop a car park in the port we should use this traditional material. Then in considering the form of the new structure they thought that they should take their queue from

warehouse architecture and give it a façade with windows that looked like a warehouse. The car park that they got is not, to me, a good result (Fig. 12). Perhaps this shows how very well intentioned and well informed attempts to capture historic flavour can be difficult to implement.

Fig. 12: the car park on the waterfront at Lowestoft, Suffolk

At the other end of the scale is Hartlepool, where a completely new historic dockside has been built (Fig. 13). At its core there is an historic dock and in the dock there is a very important historic ship the *Trincomalee*. Yet everything around it is brand new in an historic style, done very interestingly and well. But is this what we really want? Surely we can build new buildings in old places that enhance the significance of the place not erode it.

Fig. 13: 'The Maritime Experience' at Hartlepool, opened in 1994 (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

Some of the new buildings in Gloucester Docks have been good. These new apartment blocks might have been much better with slate on their roofs, but their scale and silhouette preserves the aesthetic of the place and reinforces its history (Fig. 14). The building which provides the venue for the *On the Waterfront* conference, the BT Convention Centre, on the river front in Liverpool, is another that does well. The significance of the view from the Mersey and Birkenhead was thought about with great care. It was agreed that what was significant about it was the view of the two cathedrals and that the skyline between the two should not be broken (Fig. 15). It was then agreed that the mass and scale of the grade I Albert Dock complex, a massive development in its day and still hugely impressive, should not be compromised. The third principle was to preserve the horizontality of the waterfront buildings in this area. All three achieved have been achieved well.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Fig. 14: new apartments in Gloucester Docks

Fig. 15: the BT Convention Centre on the river front in Liverpool (© John Benbow)

Fig. 16: the Tobacco Warehouse, Stanley Dock, Liverpool, built in 1903 (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

Finally back to my title. We not only ask developers to build new structures that respect the old, but we also require them to incorporate old ones that have value. Sharpness, a small inland port on the river Severn, illustrates the issues. The port's business is growing, as lorries can get to it more easily than going to nearby Bristol. However, the port has a listed, but unused, warehouse on the dockside which the port authority wants to demolish. It is of no use to them and it would be hard to find a new use. For the port authority, the warehouse appears to be a liability rather than an asset. Similar issues are present in the debate about the future of the Tobacco Warehouse in Stanley Dock in Liverpool (Fig. 16). This gargantuan building – with low ceiling heights and a hugely deep plan – may have an awesome sublimity, but extreme ingenuity is going to be needed to convert it to new uses in a revitalised dock area.

To return to the question posed in the title of this paper: as chief executive of the national heritage agency I, unsurprisingly, see the historic environment of ports as a vital source of inspiration in schemes for renewal. Agencies responsible for development might think that by 'doing the history bit' they have got heritage out of the way. But that is because all too often planners and developers are not asking the right questions. By properly and logically establishing the significance of a historic port, plans can be laid that enhance and build on that significance and that incorporate difficult heritage buildings and structures. The purpose in doing this is to make the environments of historic ports more interesting and enjoyable, and therefore successful as developments. History is not enough. We need to move the debate on to ask practical questions, ones that can be translated into a proper framework. Historic ports are places that need intelligent interrogation before we start to reinvent them for the future: understanding their heritage significance is the first step.

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact
our Customer Services department:
Telephone: 0870 333 1181
Fax: 01793 414926
Textphone: 01793 414878
E-mail: customers@english-heritage.org.uk