

Interview Date:	06-08-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Emily Gee	Organisation:	Historic England
Position:	Regional Director for London and the Southeast		

## Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Emily Gee, Regional Director for London and the Southeast at Historic England. 06-08-2020

Tom Crowley 0:01

So, we are recording. So, it is the sixth of August 2020. I'm Tom Crowley from the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre. And I'm speaking to Emily Gee of Historic England. And Emily, could you just tell me your job title, please?

Emily Gee 0:20

Yes, so I'm the Regional Director for London and the Southeast at Historic England.

Tom Crowley 0:26

Okay, thank you very much. And Emily, as we just discussed, you are speaking in your professional capacity, but that will nevertheless be inflected by your own personal perspective on what's happened. So, let me get the questions up. So the first question is, has your organisation done anything which engages with the legacy of slavery or colonialism in recent years, and that's prior to this summer's Black Lives Matter protests.

Emily Gee 1:11

So, yes, I work for Historic England. And we are the government's advisor on the historic environment. And we take it very seriously to take into account that actually that's thinking about everyone's story and thinking about the historic environment in the round. So, we've been committed for quite some time to thinking about how to really consider history as broadly and as deeply as possible in our work. And that's through both our research work, and our planning work, our engagement really across the realm with heritage in the historic environment. So, it's something that we take very seriously as I say we've had a strategy for a while. It's thinking about how we can think about in particular underrepresented heritage, and to make sure that we can be as inclusive as possible in the stories that we tell and that we work with owners and agencies and institutions and local authorities to tell as well.

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## The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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So, we've done a few things that I think are relevant to this particular subject area. And perhaps the most relevant is the project which was from 2007, from the bicentenary of the Abolition Act when lots of different organisations and agencies and community groups and individuals did work to think about how best to commemorate that really important bicentenary. And at that point, we were English Heritage. And we are now still the same organisation called Historic England, but the one that does that kind of research and policy and is still us. So, then we did it. We did a number of things. We commissioned research into properties which are now part of English Heritage. But then were all one organisation, we did our research to think about the connections of those particular properties with slavery. And that resulted in a substantive monograph, and lots of work on the reinterpretation of those sites and in those emerging guidebooks, and that's something that I'm sure English Heritage, still, that part of the organisation would be really happy to talk about.

We also did some mapping work, quite a significant project called Sites of Memory, which looked at identifying places all around the country, which had a connection with slavery and indeed, with abolition, and that was sites of all different types, not just listed places, but we also worked very closely with other organisations and individuals and societies that were doing their own research. We were kind of pulling that together and drawing very much on others work to create this Sites of Memory map. And that was produced as both a leaflet, but also as an online interactive website as a geographic based one. And then the project that I was most involved with at that time was drawing on that research, both into the properties and also into places all around the country, and thinking about how that related to the list the National Heritage list for England, as it's now called, and that's one of our roles, we advise government on what should be listed. And so we wanted that to be one of our main kind of contributions to all the important work that was going on nationally about the bicentenary because that's something that only we do: advise on what should be listed.

So we worked very closely with government, the DCMS, which is our government department, and we drew on, it's important to flag this really, we drew on others. Very much so. So, there are lots of projects happening all around the country. And we took that material and thought about how we could best use that to make the List, the National Heritage List for England, and tell the story of abolition and slavery at places in the country much more fully. And that resulted in about 50, nearly 50 either new listings or upgrades, and mostly amendments to existing listings. So we thought it was very important to get that new information into the publicly accessible statutory record. And that by sharing that information that was part of our public duty. To sort of broaden the information on the National Heritage List and to tell much more fully the stories of slavery and abolition and where it was present on the National List. And that work, which I think was um— it felt important at the time, and we still refer back to it quite a lot. And we are belatedly, but soon, going to get it actually on the website. The material is obviously already there on the National Heritage List because you can search it, one can search it. But we want to draw that together into a website, which we hope to be able to publish very soon, so that others can see the range of sites that we that we amended as part of that project. And it also helped to pave the way for some of our other underrepresented heritage projects that we've done about listing. So, we took other themes,

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subsequently into that project, looking at women's history and disability and LGBTQ history, and similarly, drew out that in listing terms on the National List based on research. So, it felt like a pioneering project for us.

More recently, just a couple of other quick things to mention. We did a project a couple of years ago called Another England which was a mapping project looking at 100 years of Black and Asian history in this country and exploring England's history through the perspective of People of Colour. And that created a public record of underrepresented stories of Black and Asian people across the country. A lot of it was photograph based. And again, we thought that was an important way to ensure that Black and Asian people's stories were embedded in our national collective story. And that's also on our website.

And then thinking more specifically about contested heritage. It's something that we've been thinking about since 2017 really, when there was a lot of discussion about statues, obviously in the American South. And we were having similar conversations here just to think about the principle of how one deals with contested heritage. And around that time, we also held an exhibition and a season of events called Immortalised, which was really looking at who decides who we commemorate in the public realm. And indeed, who isn't reflected. And that was a short, but I think quite powerful exhibition, looking at the historic environment and memory. And as part of that there was a design competition. And we exhibited the winning entries for that as part of the exhibition. And that touched a lot on this idea of reinterpretation of contested sites. And there were a number of examples that that we've referred to more recently actually thinking about ways to sort of creatively and powerfully reinterpret, contested heritage in the public realm.

So that's a— some examples of some of the work that we've done in this area in the last few years. We continue to think about how we can best let the National Heritage List help tell this broader story. So, it's something that we're thinking about at the moment. It might be also useful to mention because you've asked me about Colston that in Bristol, we helped to fund the cities and guilt theme at the Bristol Festival of the Future City in 2019. That's a festival which supports progressive research and debate on cities and contested heritage. We have an office based in Bristol, and we're part of that conversation. And so, it's something that we're very committed to. And I think it's really important, as I say that we that we engage with a wide range of projects, working in partnership as best we can. And also leading in some areas so that we can make sure that national, our national story is an inclusive one.

Tom Crowley 9:58

Great, thank you. I'm sorry, my audio might sound a bit funny. Does that sound okay to you?

Emily Gee 10:05

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Yeah, it's a little bit— um, it breaks up a bit, but I can hear what you're saying.

Tom Crowley 10:11

Okay, good. Good. Sorry about that. Um, so the next question is, has Black Lives Matter, this summer's protest movement, influenced your policy going forward? And if so, can you expand on why you made the decisions you did?

Emily Gee 10:34

It's um— we've certainly been having a lot of conversations as an organisation in the last two months now isn't it? Gosh, yeah, two months— thinking about what we need to do as an organisation to help respond to, to the public conversations which are going on at the moment. As I say we're doing work that we'd started doing three years ago. And it's been important to have that reference point for the current conversations and our engagement with owners and with communities and with local authorities that we're having quite a lot at the moment. So we've shared that and updated our pages on contested heritage, to make sure that we have the right information there for those who come to us as the government's advisor on historic environments and ask questions about what is the best practice or what they need to do as custodians of contested heritage or indeed as a community and members of the public come to us to see what we think and also how we can help.

So, there are web pages to look at which is an especially useful source I think of sharing our organisational position and sharing resources [unintelligible] the thinking in this area. And in those we've acknowledged that our perspective on history is always changing. And very much so that there are, you know, painful elements of British history that we need to face up to and better understand as a nation. And we've encouraged through our statements in this area people and community groups and members of staff to raise concerns with statues and sites that have a difficult history and to engage in a conversation. Even if it's a difficult one, that the importance of talking about these things is so important. And so we haven't we haven't changed our policy. We've refreshed it by bringing it to the fore of our web pages and indeed, almost all of our conversations that we're having with stakeholders at the moment.

Um, our position statement on contested heritage remains the same. It's perhaps worth rehearsing that here to be clear what we, as an organisation, have been saying. And that's as the government's advisor on the historic environment we believe that removing difficult and contentious parts of the historic environment would risk harming our understanding of the collective past. And instead, we usually recommend that clear, long lasting and/or innovative reinterpretation of— at or near a contested object or site can be used in order to reflect the changed context and contemporary understanding of that place be it a statue or a site or an artwork.

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So we've been really active in sharing that and engaging with cases and conversations with a wide range of owners, private owners, institutions, local parties, and we've been providing information on um— this is an emerging area of best practice here. Where there are really good examples from around the world of reinterpretation is something that we've been finding important to draw together and to share those with people who quite reasonably ask, you know, what we mean, what is powerful reinterpretation? And I think it's something that we would like to see a lot more of. And so we are engaging proactively with owners to think about how to see where it's necessary to see if our position statement [unintelligible] with some with some really good thought provoking, creative and community generated and community owned responses in this area.

Tom Crowley 14:50

Sorry, just very quickly, just to clarify, you can't necessarily provide the re-interpretation of the problematic monument, but you can kind of encourage the owners to follow certain guidelines or to kind of look to certain examples. Is that correct?

Emily Gee 15:12

Yes we don't own anything, our role is to advise local planning authorities and donors and I guess what I'm talking about here mainly is where those sites are listed, and where we have a statutory role as an advisor or consultee. And there are a number of examples of those kind of cases coming to us where the statue forms part of a listed building or a freestanding listed statue in its own right and...

[recording interrupted]

Tom Crowley 0:01

Right, sorry. So, recording again. So, the next question: has the pulling down of the Colston statue and the ensuing debate influenced your plans going forward? And again, if yes, can you expand on why you made the decisions you made?

Emily Gee 0:23

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So, the Colston statue is listed at Grade 2. So, we have a role there in advising the local planning authority. And we have been—our Southwest team has been involved for some time with the statue and the conversations that have been going on locally in Bristol about a proposed new plaque. And indeed, one of the competition entries for our Immortalised exhibition in 2018 was specifically looking at that statute. It was a very powerful proposal from MSMR Architects looking at a way of re-siting the statue in its existing place in a rather extraordinary and a very powerful way of thinking about placing Colston on a slave ship. And obviously that wasn't taken forward but— so we've been involved in the conversations for a while. And when the statue was pulled down we responded and flagged that, of course we don't condone the unauthorised removal of listed structures, and reminding of course, that it is listed. But we also recognise that the statue of Colston was a symbol of injustice and a source of great pain for many people and indeed had been the subject of conversation locally for some time.

As I've already said, our position is that we that we believe that removing difficult and contested parts of our heritage can risk harming the way that we understand, you know, our collective past. And we don't think that removal should be undertaken lightly. And indeed, as I said before we usually recommend that clear and longlasting interpretation is the way forward. In this instance, we commented that we do not think that the statue must be reinstated, but emphasise that this is a decision best taken locally. So, we've encouraged Bristol City Council to engage in a wide conversation locally about the future of the statue. And we will have a role and we'll be there to join in, but it's very much a local decision as Grade 2 Listed statute and one that— it's really important that the local community is actively engaged in that conversation.

So our position remains the same but obviously we— it was a very important situation to comment on as the government's advisor on historic environment, and it has encouraged us to, again, as I said earlier, to look very closely at our guidance, what we offer and provide to councils and to owners and indeed to the community and the public at large, about contested heritage. And we have checked that we are providing as much as we can in that area and indeed have commissioned some more work internally to make sure that we have as much sort of policy and guidance and advice available to engage with those conversations. We have had some other applications in since that point for dealing with statues of different grades of listing and it's important to say that obviously each case needs to be looked at on its own merits. Each situation will be a slightly different one, but our broad position remains the same. But we encourage a very rigorous understanding of the history of each site: the origins of it, the intent, the original intent and think also about you know, the actual piece of sculpture as well: its quality, whether or not its original, those sorts of practical, technical issues are important, as well as the feeling around the statue and the biography of the of the person involved, who's being commemorated. Those are all things that we encourage the local authority to consider, very much in the round, when we have provided a checklist for local planning authorities to go through. This is something we put up in 2018. We've amended that slightly recently to make sure it's up to date, but it's a useful guide we hope for local authorities to think very carefully about these sorts of issues when asked to do so.

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Tom Crowley 5:04

Great, thank you very much. Thanks. Um, next question: has the website Topples the Racists influenced any of your responses?

Emily Gee 5:21

It hasn't influenced as such, but it's obviously served to highlight the issue nationally in that it's focused attention on specific statues which then prompted their owners or the guardians of those to think about how they should react. Some have erected temporary hoardings and temporary signage at the time to protect against sort of perceived threats to the structure. And they've also prompted them to have sort of medium-term conversations about what they should best do about the statues in their care and guardianship. And so, we've seen a rise in requests for advice around contested heritage, particularly freestanding statues and sculpture on listed buildings. And as I say, we prepared a checklist a few years ago, which is still very relevant here to help local authorities deal with those kinds of conversations, both in the immediate term, in terms of protecting something from perceived harm and also in the medium and longer term about what's the most appropriate kind of intellectual and public duty and response that should be taken in in that regard.

Tom Crowley 6:52

Excellent, thank you. I'm just going to slightly make the next question have a bit more relevance to Historic England. I keep on nearly saying English Heritage. So, you mentioned the Immortalised temporary exhibition project. Do you have future plans that like Immortalised could key into kind of problematic heritage, particularly the legacies of slavery or colonialism? Going forward in the future? Do you have things in the pipeline?

Emily Gee 7:36

So, we commissioned a piece of work last year, I think it was, which feels particularly timely now. And it's a project called the Transatlantic Slave Economy and England's Built Environment Research Audit. And that's a piece of work which is coming to fruition quite soon and we're holding a webinar next week with academics and local research groups and Black and Ethnic Minority heritage research networks and other major heritage organisations to come together and to talk about that particular research audit and also to start conversations about how that material can be used by different organisations, by those groups I already mentioned and indeed by us at Historic England. So, we'll publish that research and that will be available to share and hopefully will be a significant tool in terms of the knowledge base in addressing contested heritage. And we do have as I say— we look after, maintain on behalf of government, the National Heritage List

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for England so we will have conversations about how to best use that material in the future to enhance the National Heritage List. And bearing in mind the project that we did about that in 2007. But it there's always more work to be done in that kind of area.

So, that's one of the very live projects. We are also, as I mentioned earlier, thinking about reinterpretation, we held the Immortalised exhibition which you just referred to, and we've been asked to sort of bring that information to life again, in some way. Obviously, you know, exhibitions are often quite ephemeral, but we do have material from that. So we'll be just starting to have internal conversations really about how we can let that meaningful research and work from that time be available. And also think about ways that we can draw together in a useful way the best practice that we've observed, internationally in this area. Because I think it's really good that we have examples to share with people when we're encouraging a specific approach, we need to be able to back that up and inspire people and encourage them to think about ways of doing that in a really meaningful and creative way. We do have, again, it's been in the works for a little while, we're hoping to publish it this autumn, our organisational diversity and inclusion strategy, which is looking across all of our work, and identifying ways that we could be much more inclusive in what we do and how we can do it better and working with a wider range of people to make sure that historic environment is something that's accessible to everyone and also interesting to everyone and that we take very seriously that duty to tell our nation's story very much in the round.

And again, thinking internally we've established quite recently our race equality network within the organisation is established and really powerful weekly conversations, [called] talking action, which is for sort of, for conversation and discussions. There's an extensive reading list and colleagues are coming together across the organisation regularly to talk about issues that they're aware of personally and professionally and also how that relates to our work. So that that feels like a really important piece of work. It's, as I say, it's internal, but it helps I think very much to support us all as colleagues, but also helps us think about how— the relevance of our work to the public more broadly, which I think is really, really important at the moment.

Tom Crowley 11:50

Excellent, thank you. Thank you very much. I think we covered most things, but um, yes, you have mentioned a couple of times some examples of best practice, looking around the world for examples of how problematic heritage has been mediated. Is that going to kind of take the form of a policy document? Or is it an archive that you'll draw on and advise in an ad hoc basis? So, I was wondering if you could tell me a bit more about that.

Emily Gee 12:32

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Yes, we're trying to decide at the moment what's the best way of doing that. We expect it will be shared as a sort of standalone document, just drawing attention to interesting examples that we've seen from our own knowledge or indeed from, you know, from people recommending things to us. And we have discussions— we have a wide ranging group of external advisors on our committees and expert advisory group, so we can draw on their expertise draw this together, I think we are really hoping that in the next few months that examples will emerge around us. So we would like to— we're sort of proactively working with a few organisations or owners who've come to us or have indeed made us aware of the contested heritage that they'd look after and so we'd like to be able to work with them.

Our role is mostly a planning and advisory role, but we do have a small public engagement team who were involved with that Immortalised exhibition. So, we're trying to think about how we can support that in the best way. There are a number of initiatives happening around the country, as I'm sure you know, and lots of mapping projects at the moment, which I think is a really important way of kind of connecting people in places like this, of seeing where contested heritage is. There are some projects in that regard, and also commissions that are being established by local authorities and indeed by the Mayor of London. So, we will be a member of the partners board for the Mayor of London's Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm, which will allow us to flag the importance of kind of history and research and understanding, which is often available through local societies as well through national organisations and flag the importance of that. And also, we do have a role in advising on new design and new commissions. So obviously much of the environment around us is historic, so whether there are new interventions, new statues, new artworks, new signage, that's something that we can be involved with and advise on. So, through those commissions but also through our statutory role, we'll be trying to encourage a positive focus on a much more diverse and much more representative public realm around us, which is something we think is very important as well.

Tom Crowley 15:13

Thank you. I will stop the recording now. Unless there's anything else you want to add the record?

Emily Gee 15:25

No, I think that's it. Thank you.

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