

Black & Asian Studies Association

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Rob Prideaux
Comptroller and Auditor General
The National Audit Office
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25 September 2009

Dear Mr Prideaux,

THE NAO REPORT: PROMOTING PARTICIPATION WITH THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

Thank you again for inviting BASA to take part in the workshop held on 18 February 2009 discussing the effectiveness of the way the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has worked with English Heritage 'to drive up participation rates, with a particular emphasis on addressing inequalities between different population groups.'

The BASA Management Committee has considered the resultant report's findings and recommendations. It supports the recommendations, but is concerned that the results may not be achievable due to implementation procedures.

We are particularly concerned that the figures claimed by heritage organisations for an increase in participation of BME group visitors are not based on embedded and consistent monitoring practice at each property or site where visitor entrance is controlled.

The report notes an achieved "target met" of a 3.4% increase in visitors to historic sites in the DCMS Taking Part survey in 2008. This was for the period 2007-2008 measured against statistics for 2005-2006. Since English Heritage and all major heritage institutions instituted a specific push to be more inclusive in 2007, it is unclear whether the Memory research project of English Heritage for the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 was responsible for this increase in figures. Therefore there is some questioning of the long-term validity of this "target met". English Heritage claims that it had not been asked to measure the diversity of visitors to its properties. (*Museums Journal*. September 2009. pg. 11)

The Committee takes into account that there is a degree of overlap between the three target groups. Black and ethnic minority members of the population are heavily over-represented in lower socio-economic groups and some of the difficulties both groups face should be seen as common: cost of travel; cost of entry; cost of food and drink.

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Specific illnesses, such as sickle cell anaemia, mean that they can be disproportionately represented in the group of people suffering from long term health problems.

The Committee considers that it is very important for English Heritage, and other heritage visitor attraction organisations to constantly ask themselves 'Why should members of black and ethnic minority groups want to visit English Heritage properties and sites?'

Low income and BME groups may share a cultural analysis that a lot of the properties are a reminder of their low social and economic status, the exploitation of their class and ethnic group, and therefore visiting is not relevant to them and they may find it demoralising. Most properties do not reflect the lives of the ordinary people who built them, were employed to service the former wealthy owners, and were exploited as agricultural labourers on the estates (in the UK and overseas) owned by those owners.

Potential black and ethnic minority visitors should not be seen as a homogeneous group. Their interests and attitudes will vary.

- Those of Afro-Caribbean heritage may not wish to be reminded that some properties were owned by those involved in the slavery business and the wealth they made was invested in the properties.
- Those of direct African and South Asian heritage may not wish to be reminded that many of the former owners were colonial exploiters.
- Those of South Asian heritage from Africa may have extra reasons for not wishing to be reminded of colonial exploitation.
- Many of the newer ethnic minority individuals have English language difficulties, and they will not be able to read the text of displays and the guides, or understand the verbal explanations.
- There may be similar and additional factors in the thinking of those from West and East Asia.

On the other hand these negative aspects of many properties can be counterbalanced by the fact that the wealth extracted through exploitation and the capital of the building and development of the properties are part of the heritage of black and ethnic minority groups, and that this includes the fight against colonialism and for independence. There are also many cultural influences for example from the Indian sub-continent, Turkey and China reflected in some properties. The considerable and varied experience of the panel consulted by NAO (including BASA, the Windrush Foundation and the Anglo-Sikh Heritage Trail) was that the biggest issue for Black and Asian audiences is the omission of their contribution to the structures - whether that be tangible (e.g. materials, artworks, etc.) or intangible (e.g. source of capital, former employees, etc.) rather than the poor or negligible representation. It is worse to leave out facts of history than to poorly represent them. That said there was a suggestion that appropriate and culturally sensitive narratives should be displayed in a variety of means.

Much of English Heritage's stock is pre-historic, Roman and medieval, and therefore may appear initially to be of no relevance to black and ethnic minority members of the population except in relation to their children having to learn about these historic periods at school. However, important narratives of the African (Carthaginian, Numidian
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& Mauritanian) and Asian (Galacian and the Leventine) contributions to the Roman Army and the multi-racial nature of slavery in the Roman Empire should be addressed.

The NAO report lists the ten English Heritage properties and sites where entrance was charged in 2008-9 visitors. The third most popular was Osborne House. One of the members of the Committee made a specific visit to it to assess the extent to which the displays reflected the Black and Asian members of her entourage and adopted children. She was bitterly disappointed that it did no.

The challenge to attract members of black and ethnic minority groups is different for each of the top ten properties, let alone the 118 other charging properties and sites English Heritage is responsible for.

Two members of the Committee will be addressing difficult narratives of relevance to Black and Asian audiences at the Slavery and the British Country House: Mapping Current Research Conference on Saturday 21st November 2009.

I and the BASA Secretary recently attended a consultation event run by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The BASA Management Committee has agreed to make representations to HLF on the issue of embedment of increasing DCMS target groups participation as a criteria for funding, and that consideration be given to the idea that no property or site should be funded where charges are prohibitive to visitors from the lower income groups.

Taking the above into account the Committee requests the NAO to consider adding into its evidence to the Parliamentary Select Committee which will review the report an additional recommendation that it be a specific requirement on English Heritage to monitor the diversity of visitors to its properties, and that it is a specific requirement that it incorporates into every property and site business and development plan the way in which it is actively going to seek to increase participation by BME groups by making the visitor experience more relevant.

This is not special pleading because all visitors have the right to know that they are getting a comprehensive and rounded picture of the history of the properties and sites they visit.

Yours sincerely,

Cliff Pereira
Chair