National Heritage in Private Hands:

The Political and Cultural Status of Country Houses in Britain, 1950–2000

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Abstract

This study examines the role of privately owned country houses in political and cultural discourse in Britain between 1950 and 2000. It expands existing scholarship on how and why policy affecting country houses has developed, and contextualises these developments broadly within cultural and political changes of the late-twentieth century.

The thesis situates privately owned country houses within the broader history of the rise of the 'heritage industry' and heritage preservation policy in Britain. It utilises the Historic House Association's (HHA's) archives, and the personal archives of some of its key figures, which have not been studied by researchers before. This approach contributes unprecedented detail to the study of built heritage preservation policy changes, and particularly to our understanding of how aristocrats have influenced modern politics via the heritage sector.

Existing accounts of the country house's "survival" in twentieth-century Britain are predominantly cultural. This perspective in isolation obscures critical dynamics within governments, and between governments and lobbyists. Relationships between country house lobbyists and Treasury and Inland Revenue officials, which long outlasted individual governments, were essential in the development of crucial taxation exemptions for heritage. The conditional exemption of heritage properties from Capital Transfer Tax in 1975/76, under Wilson's government, set a critical precedent for the special treatment of historic houses under taxation, which was expanded during the 1980s. This became the foundation of the cross-party political principle that country houses are best maintained in private hands, although Wilson's cabinet had not truly resolved their objections to granting country house owners financial privileges. Governments' subsequent expansion of public aid for privately owned houses and collections was rooted in this political principle. During the 1980s and 1990s, the importance of "saving" country houses and their collections was taken for granted by both the public and governments—even under the allegedly heritage-averse New Labour.

Extended Abstract

This study examines the role of privately owned country houses in political and cultural discourse in Britain between 1950 and 2000. It expands existing scholarship on how and why policy affecting country houses has developed, and contextualises these developments broadly within cultural and political changes of the late-twentieth century. It offers a new perspective on the nature and structures of power and political influence in recent British history, through study of the methods and effectiveness of country house lobbyists.

The thesis situates privately owned country houses within the broader history of the rise of the 'heritage industry' and heritage preservation policy in Britain. It utilises the Historic House Association's (HHA's) archives, and the personal archives of some of its key figures, which have not been studied by researchers before. This approach contributes unprecedented detail to the study of built heritage preservation policy changes, and particularly to our understanding of how aristocrats have influenced modern politics via the heritage sector.

The 1950 Gowers Report on the future of Britain's buildings of 'outstanding historic or architectural interest' is considered a pivotal statement on the significance of Britain's country houses, although few of its recommendations were implemented at the time. Chapter One details how the Report originated with the personal commitment of two Labour Chancellors who were particularly concerned with protecting the country's historic landscape and buildings, including those owned by the aristocracy, despite a concurrent commitment to the redistribution of wealth. In the wake of two world wars, a romanticised image of the country house's place in national culture and identity played no small part in the Attlee government's commitment to historic preservation. Nevertheless, and contrary to the Gowers Report's recommendations, both Attlee's and Churchill's governments rejected targeted tax exemptions for private historic house owners. Historic Buildings Councils were introduced as the primary means of ensuring built heritage preservation, through grants and listing. The Councils were predisposed toward aiding country houses, as detailed in Chapter Two, but could only aid the houses in the greatest need due to

limited funds. Out of necessity, owners turned to opening their houses to tourists in order to maintain them. With limited alternative leisure options available, the public popularity of country houses soared. The first lobbying union of country house owners was rooted in tourism, under the British Travel Association (later British Tourist Authority). This focus on tourism shaped the future of what became the HHA in 1973; the HHA considered public access a prerequisite for tax exemptions.

It took the threat of a financial crisis for privately owned country houses in the mid-1970s, in the form of the Labour Party's pre-election commitment to a wealth tax in 1973/74, before exemptions were introduced to protect "significant" historic houses from the full effects of estate duty (which became Capital Transfer Tax). Chapter Three argues that the heritage campaigns of 1974/75 did not convince the Labour government that privately owned country houses required public subsidy, contrary to the commentary of contemporaries and subsequent histories of these events. The conditional exemption from Capital Transfer Tax for heritage land and buildings introduced in 1975 was intended as a temporary measure until a permanent solution could be found. The government allowed that temporary measure to stay in place because they failed to find a better solution, and not because the Labour Party had accepted that historic house owners ought to receive tax exemptions. While conditional exemption became less significant in the 1980s, with the ability to avoid IHT under the seven-year rule, its expansion in 1975 set a crucial precedent for special treatment of historic houses under capital taxation policy.

Chapter Three also contextualises the rapid professionalisation of the country house lobby alongside the activities of other heritage campaign organisations, such as the Georgian Group and SAVE Britain's Heritage. This chapter argues that the economic and architectural value of country houses became more widely accepted, particularly by the middle classes, during the 1970s. However, country houses were at a political disadvantage when compared to the subjects of many of the new heritage campaigns of this period, many of which were explicitly seeking to redress an imbalance between the government's support of 'elite' heritage and the built heritage of 'ordinary' people. Within this context, lobbyists were required to present the country house as nationally significant with universal social utility, continually reaffirming its social

value. This has been one of the key features of lobbying on behalf of the country house since the 1980s, as discussed in Chapters Five and Seven.

The tension between the economic efficiency of heritage-related policy and how it may be perceived by the public is a crucial dynamic in this history, and it is explored through the sale of Mentmore Towers in Chapter Four. Heritage campaigners' much-publicised criticisms of the government's failure to purchase this "threatened" country house prompted the government to provide independently administered funds to enable quicker responses to future country houses "crises". The Thatcher government introduced the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which prioritised funding for privately owned country houses when the other significant quango introduced in this period, English Heritage, focused on funding the most publicly accessible projects. This funding dynamic is detailed in Chapter Five, which demonstrates the decisive influence of the civil service in shaping policy decisions affecting privately owned historic buildings during the 1980s. The creation of both quangos was part of a wider shift towards privatisation of public services in Britain, which continued through the 1990s and into New Labour's governments.

The prominence of country houses in film and other media in the 1980s contributed to increasing appreciation of the country house ensemble both domestically and internationally. The scale and popularity of the 1985 *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition in Washington, D.C. demonstrated the elevated cultural status of British country houses, as discussed in Chapter Five. The rapid growth of the international art market in the 1980s enabled substantial financial retrenchment for those private owners who possessed rare artworks and furniture, transforming the financial situation of many of the largest country houses. The phenomenon of the 'country house sale', i.e. chattels auctions on a larger and more polished scale than ever before, contributed to this process. The sales, at their height during the 1980s and 1990s, demonstrate that the country house as a concept held significant cultural and economic value.

When Heritage Lottery funding was introduced in 1994, the initial exclusion of privately owned historic houses indicated that the focus of public support for heritage was moving away from country houses. Chapter Six argues that a culture of antipathy toward aristocratic wealth

was prevalent among government ministers and within the civil service, including within the new Department for National Heritage. This marked a cultural shift within the department that dealt with historic preservation (then the Department for National Heritage, but previously the Department for the Environment), which had previously exerted internal pressure on the Treasury and Inland Revenue in favour of targeted concessions for privately owned heritage (as outlined in Chapter Five).

Chapter Seven argues that critics have exaggerated the extent to which the first Blair ministry diminished the role of 'heritage' in Britain, but the late 1990s was nevertheless a period of political uncertainty for private country house owners. When the system of conditional exemption for heritage buildings and chattels was publicly challenged on the grounds that owners were failing to meet their public access obligations, the HHA and allied heritage bodies found themselves restating the basic case for financial protection of privately owned historic buildings, which had gone essentially unchallenged since 1976. The subsequent continuation of the scheme with only minor adjustment demonstrates that it was still considered the most financially efficient method of preservation. However, the incident also demonstrated the political difficulty of granting asset-rich aristocrats further concessions, however cash-poor they may be. Towards the end of the twentieth century, private owners and the HHA were fighting a well-entrenched belief that the future of country houses in Britain was now secure.

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Abbreviations

Archives

PA	Parliamentary Archives
TNA	The National Archives
VAM	Victoria and Albert Museum Archives

Organisations and Institutions

BTA	British Travel Association (–1969/70); British Tourist Authority (1969/70–2003)
HHA	Historic Houses Association
HHC	Historic Houses Committee (within the BTA; 1965–77)
HHSC	Historic Houses Standing Committee (within the BTA; 1971–73)
NACF	National Art Collections Fund (now Art Fund)
NADFAS	National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies
NT	National Trust
NTS	National Trust for Scotland
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects
SAVE	SAVE Britain's Heritage
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum

Government Bodies and Funds

DAMHB	Department of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media and Sport
DNH	Department of National Heritage
DOE	Department of the Environment
DTLGR	Department of Transport, National Government and the Regions
HBC	Historic Buildings Council
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
MOW	Ministry of Works
NHMF	National Heritage Memorial Fund
NLF	National Land Fund

Taxation

AIL	Acceptance-in-lieu of taxation
CTT	Capital Transfer Tax
HMF	Heritage Maintenance Funds
IHT	Inheritance Tax

Introduction

At the opening gala of *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting*, a grand exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 1985, Lord Charteris of Amisfield declared that 'the British country house is, after parliamentary democracy, perhaps Britain's most enduring contribution to civilisation'.[1] Nobody contemplating the country house's future in 1950 would have foreseen such a triumphant celebration of its endurance a mere thirty-five years later. A government report of that year on the future of 'houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest', the Gowers Report, stated that country estates faced an 'impending catastrophe': 'a disaster comparable only to that which the country suffered by the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century'.[2] Retrospectively, given the centrality of country houses in the idea of "British heritage" by the end of the twentieth century, most observers would assume that the country house's post-war preservation was all but guaranteed. This assumption obscures the complex relationships and political compromises that underlay the development of built heritage preservation policy and funding between 1950 and 2000. This thesis explains fully, for the first time, the development and continual reinforcement of the policy line that country houses are best maintained in private hands. This history is essential to a thorough understanding of the state's approach to taxation of inherited wealth; the social and political status of the aristocracy; the development of the heritage industry and the funding apparatus for built heritage; and the very concept of British heritage itself.

The political detail of country house preservation has been overlooked in previous studies because existing accounts of the country house in twentieth-century Britain are broadly cultural. In exploring the negotiations behind policy changes affecting privately owned country houses in twentieth-century Britain, this thesis demonstrates that the changing political status of country houses has been just as significant as their cultural status. It addresses what other histories of the

[1] 'Reflections: The Story of the Exhibition: The Treasure Houses of Britain' video, Historic Houses Archives, broadcast details unknown.
[2] Ernest Gowers, *Report of the Committee on Houses of Outstanding Historic or Architectural Interest* (London, 1950), p. 5.

privately owned country house have not acknowledged in any detail for the period after 1975, and in limited detail for 1950–1975; namely, how broader political, economic, and cultural changes have facilitated and shaped the development of the fiscal apparatus that has enabled country houses to continue in private ownership into the twenty-first century. In order to understand the effects of broader changes, we must pay attention to the intricacies of policymaking: who made a particular decision, and why? When and how did it become the dominant political narrative that Britain's country houses must be supported by public money, and—straying even further from the future imagined for them in the immediate post-war years—supported to remain in private ownership?

The country house is an idea rather than a set of criteria, and that idea has changed enormously since 1950. John Cornforth claimed that he had confined his 1998 study of country houses to 'houses that have kept their historically associated contents, gardens, and parks, and often their estates'.[3] He estimated the number of country houses that were 'still fairly complete entities in private ownership' at 1,500.[4] Yet, the distinction between the country houses that survived as historical entities (or ensembles of land, house, and contents) and new builds was truly blurred by 1998. There was no point at which owners stopped rebuilding, renovating, and remodelling their country houses—or indeed any point at which architects stopped building new country houses.[5] Moreover, few country house owners had avoided exchanging some of their estate's chattels or land for greater financial stability, including those that could boast the greatest success stories of post-war restoration. There can be no definitive statistic on the number of country houses that "survive", existed, or were destroyed at any point in time. As this thesis will show, the deployment of different definitions of the country house has been an integral feature of the lobbying processes that have shaped preservation policy.

[3] J. Cornforth, *The Country Houses of England* (London, 1998), p. 3.
[4] Ibid., p. 3. By contrast, Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd claimed that there had been 2,000 country seats in the mid-1970s, which was reduced to 1,400 by 1992. See M. Sayer and H. Montgomery-Massingberd, *The Disintegration of a Heritage: Country Houses and their Collections, 1979–1992* (Norwich, 1993), p. 2.
[5] See A. Tinniswood, *Noble Ambitions: The Fall and Rise of the Post-War Country House* (London, 2021), 'Ideal Homes'.

In order to delineate the development of lobbyists' campaigns in defence and promotion of the country house, this study has drawn on the archives of the Historic Houses Association (HHA). The HHA was and is a cooperative association of independently owned historic houses, castles, and gardens.[6] Its development as an independent organisation in 1973 is one of the critical aspects of this history that has not received thorough attention from scholars. Since then, it has been the main political representative of privately owned country houses. The unprecedented access to HHA archives facilitated for this study has enabled a thorough understanding of how the priorities and self-positioning of the HHA changed between 1973 and 2000. This study is about much more than the institutional history of the HHA, but that history is an essential facet of it; other studies have suffered from its absence.

The HHA never viewed or described itself as a lobby group during the twentieth century. Primarily, it has always been an association with different tiers of membership, the most important being house members and general (visitor) members, who support the association in return for free or discounted entry to member houses and gardens. However, since its inception, the HHA has lobbied the government on behalf of private historic house owners consistently, and it is on this basis that the terminology of 'lobbying' and 'lobby group' is used to describe the HHA and its activities in this study. These terms are not intended to be pejorative; they are the most appropriate to describe the process of the HHA attempting to convince politicians and civil servants of its point of view.

This thesis is the first study to draw on the HHA's archives. Those archives include the organisation's own records, and those held at the homes of former HHA presidents, including Beaulieu Palace House (Edward, Lord Montagu), Rockingham Castle (Michael Saunders Watson), and Castle Howard (George Howard, Lord Henderskelfe). Norman Hudson's papers at Upper Wardington House constituted another invaluable archive. Alongside government records, these archives enabled a comprehensive understanding of lobbying processes at Westminster. It

[6] Independently owned houses include those owned by 'small charitable trusts, businesses, educational institutions, or local authorities'. See: 'Independent Heritage Working Together', https://www.historichouses.org/our-story/ (25 Feb. 2022).

was not possible to outline fully the differences in policy and its implementation between England, Scotland, and Wales within the confines of this thesis. The history of the changing political, cultural, and social status of Scottish country houses and estates warrants a separate study, enabling reflection on the role of historic houses in twentieth-century Scottish national identity and heritage.

Nevertheless, this thesis is the most comprehensive study yet of the concept of the country house in Britain between 1950 and 2000. It argues that the Labour governments of the mid-1970s set decisive precedents for the future protection of country houses in policy, essentially presenting the principle that country houses were best preserved in private ownership as a *fait accompli*, although that principle had not been accepted by previous governments. The sale of Mentmore Towers was a crucial moment in this process, as the government responded to public criticism of their decision not to buy the house and its contents by establishing the National Heritage Memorial Fund. Subsequently, the rapid expansion of the art market during the 1980s strengthened the political position of privately owned country houses—particularly those with valuable art collections. Governments' struggles to prevent "significant" artworks leaving Britain during the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated the necessity of subsidising private ownership—because of broad acceptance that the artworks, and the country seats that had housed them, were worth keeping. The story of country house preservation towards the end of the twentieth century is therefore one of public subsidisation consistently overriding the wider political trend towards privatisation, and a mutually reinforcing relationship between the country house's political and cultural status.

Wider context: historiography and objectives of this study

I. Studies of the country house and preservation policy

The first scholarship thoroughly to contextualise the country house's place within the social and economic history of twentieth-century Britain was published in the 1990s; the most expansive works being David Cannadine's *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990) and Peter

Mandler's *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (1997). Within his landmark study of the history of the British aristocracy since the 1870s, Cannadine used the economic status of country houses as a metric for the success of the aristocracy as a social class. He described the revival in landowners' confidence in the 1960s as 'the last, silver age of the country house' before the energy crisis and soaring maintenance costs of the early 1970s left the patricians 'once again an endangered species'.[7] Contrasting the spectacular recovery of a few treasure houses and their estates with a general picture of abandoned country seats, Cannadine emphasised that the remaining country houses were social anachronisms regardless of their financial viability. Due to his focus on the overall status of the aristocracy, Cannadine paid scant attention to how political changes affected country house owners *as* country house owners. Peter Mandler, who focused more explicitly on country houses in *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, combined political history with the social and cultural narratives explored by Cannadine. In doing so, Mandler demonstrated that the history of the country house is about much more than the status of the aristocracy; it must be understood as part of the rise of 'national heritage' and alongside the efforts of particularly enthusiastic politicians, owners, and campaigners. Mandler approached his study as an attempt to unpick the centrality of country houses to British 'national heritage' at the time he was writing.[8] His decision to use the phrase 'stately home' is revealing; Mandler's narrative is one of the private, secluded family home becoming national property in spirit, even if not always leaving private hands.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the government's preservation apparatus for built heritage grew from listing (i.e. prohibiting the destruction of select buildings) to a sprawling network of arms-length bodies offering guidance and funding. John Delafons, who had been a senior civil servant in the Department of the Environment, detailed the development of built heritage preservation policy from the government's perspective in *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882-1996* (1997). Delafons traced the history of urban conservation from the premise that 'developments in policy usually reflect wider social or cultural

[7] D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, rev. 2nd edn (London, 1992), p. 652.
[8] P. Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (London, 1997), p. 1.

influences'.[9] Other studies in this area have expanded our understanding of how amenity groups and conservation campaign groups influenced governments to involve the state in built heritage preservation from the late nineteenth century.[10] Those produced by individuals involved with preservation campaigns have provided perspectives that, although heavily biased in their general outlook, contribute valuable perspectives to our understanding of the development of preservation policy. Architectural historian John Cornforth's *The Country Houses of England, 1948–1998* (1998) provides an informative overview of the fiscal changes that have aided privately owned country houses.[11] Michael Sayer's *The Disintegration of a Heritage: Country Houses and their Collections, 1979–1992* (1993) is misleading in the claims that it makes about the "loss" of country houses,[12] but it is a useful catalogue of the artworks that have been sold from country house collections. Shifts in the international art market have profoundly affected both private ownership of country houses and the policies that support that private ownership, but the history of the art market is generally treated as a footnote in studies that focus on preservation policy. One of the contributions of this thesis is to demonstrate that changes in the art market have directly affected those policies.[13]

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[9] J. Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882–1996* (London, 1997), p. 1. As will be detailed in Chapter Three, the history of the preservation of urban heritage is inseparable from that of the preservation of country houses; they have coalesced and clashed in important ways.

[10] See M. Hunter, *Preserving the Past: The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain* (Stroud, 1996); B. Cowell, *The Heritage Obsession: The Battle for England's Past* (Stroud, 2008); and S. Thurley, *Men from the Ministry: How Britain Saved its Heritage* (London, 2013).

[11] Martin Drury described Cornforth as 'one of the handful of people responsible for the current level of public interest in the English country house—and for creating the climate for the legislation that now protects it'. See: 'John Cornforth' (8 May 2004), theguardian.com/news/2004/may/08/guardianobituaries (28 Feb. 2022).

[12] For example, one of its prime examples of "loss" is Brympton d'Evercy, a house that its owners, Charles and Judy Clive-Ponsonby-Fane, had desperately tried to maintain. However, the house had not been continually occupied by the family and it was not a "complete entity"; its contents were sold in 1956, after which it housed a boys' school until 1974. It was bought by another family and is now used as a wedding venue.

[13] For an overview of the development of the Waverley criteria, see V. F. Wang, 'Whose Responsibility? The Waverley System, Past and Present', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 15/3 (2008), 227–69.

G. Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste* (3 vols, London, 1961–70) and G. Keen, *The Sale of Works of Art: A Study Based on the Times-Sotheby Index* (Norwich, 1971) attempt to track the prices of different "categories" of art in the twentieth century American and European markets. More recent studies focus on contemporary markets—in both senses of the word 'contemporary', e.g. N. Degen, *The Market* (London, 2013); G. Adam, *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the 21st Century* (Farnham, 2014); and N. Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton, 2014).

The role of civil servants in shaping policy is another overlooked aspect of studies of the country house in twentieth-century Britain. Emer Crooke has shown that civil servants' influence was decisive in the attitude of the state and state bodies to the country house in an independent Ireland between 1922 and 1973.[14] Crooke tracked the attitudes of civil servants in the Office of Public Works, and of those working for the Land Commission. In Britain, lobbyists' relationships with the Inland Revenue and Treasury proved more significant than their relationship with the Office of Works and its various successors that have managed the state's involvement with built heritage. Simon Thurley has shown the importance of these intra-government dynamics at various key moments in the development of preservation policy.[15] This study takes a longer view of those dynamics and how they developed over the course of fifty years. An understanding of civil servants' views on capital taxation principles is a fundamental component of this history, given the significance of tax exemptions for the preservation of private country houses.[16] As such, this study contextualises the country house's political status within broader governmental changes of the late-twentieth century, such as increasing privatisation, to a greater extent than previous studies.

II. Lobbying and policymaking

A study of the dynamics between civil servants and lobbyists (in various guises) enables a more thorough understanding of how and why political concessions for country house owners were enacted. The HHA appeared at a time when professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or pressure groups were proliferating, in the early 1970s.[17] It differed from the majority of these organisations in that it was run by aristocrats, many of whom had hereditary seats in the House

[14] E. Crooke, *White Elephants: The Country House and the State in Independent Ireland*, 1922–73 (Dublin, 2018).
[15] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, particularly 'Who Saves Country Houses?', pp. 178–95.
[16] Martin Daunton has written the most thorough analysis of the dynamics of British taxation policy in this period. See: M. J. Daunton, *Just Taxes: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1914–1979* (Cambridge, 2002).
[17] The term 'pressure groups' finds wider application than 'NGO' and does not carry pejorative implications about the groups' methods. See: W. Grant, *Pressure Groups and British Politics*, 3rd edn (London, 2000), p. 8.

of Lords. It is therefore an interesting case study for both the development of lobbying and the changing status of the aristocracy. Detailed analysis of its changing priorities and lobbying methods provides insight into the broader development of heritage advocacy and aids an integrated analysis of the combined effects of policy measures at particular moments in time.

There has been extensive analysis of the role of pressure groups in British policymaking; the political scholar Wyn Grant has described the second half of the twentieth century as 'the era of pressure groups in British politics'.[18] In *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (2013), Matthew Hilton, James Mckay, Nicholas Crowson, and Jean-François Mouhot observed that the 1970s clearly established the groundwork for a new working relationship between public and private services in Britain, which was expanded with the privatisation drive of the 1980s.[19] Although this analysis is focused on larger NGOs, such as Oxfam, Shelter, and Greenpeace, the emergence of professional, non-party political advocates in the third sector corresponds with the HHA's development.[20] While the 'narrative of privileged amateurism being displaced by meritocratic professionalism' that Hilton et al identify applies to the HHA,[21] a crucial difference is that the early leaders of the HHA had the resources to ensure that they were the most professional of amateurs: they could work for the HHA without pay, and the hours they dedicated to lobbying often equated to a full-time job. After a few years of running the HHA, Edward Montagu or George Howard (its first two Presidents) could hardly have been described as amateurs. Therefore, the HHA can be understood as an NGO within a political arena that adapted to the involvement of NGOs, but it should also be understood as an organisation that has always been represented and advanced (at least in part) by aristocrats. This both changes an analysis of the lobbyists *as lobbyists* and requires attention to the aspects of their political and cultural influence that cannot be explained by the changing patterns and structures of policymaking.

[18] Grant, *Pressure Groups*, p. 2.
[19] M. Hilton, J. McKay, N. Crowson, and J. Mouhot, *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2013), p. 32.
[20] Hilton, McKay, Crowson, and Mouhot, *Politics of Expertise,* p. 76.
[21] Ibid.

Many of the patterns of policymaking identified in this thesis find parallels in other policy areas. In a study of the agricultural policy community published in 1992, Martin J. Smith concluded that the community was 'able to say that there is a consensus on agricultural policy' by 'excluding groups which disagree with agricultural policy'.[22] A parallel can be found in the heritage policy community; exclusions may not have been calculated, but the community naturally coalesced around shared viewpoints on how, for instance, funding should operate or planning restrictions should be eased. The stand-out example of this is the widespread support that the HHA enjoyed from other heritage organisations when campaigning for exemptions from a proposed wealth tax, as detailed in Chapter Three. Smith utilises Richardson's and Jordan's work on pressure groups, in which they describe the dominant style of policymaking in the UK during the 1970s as featuring a blurred distinction between the governed and the governors due to the shared priorities and 'consensual style' of the relationships between government agencies and interest groups.[23] As will be shown in Chapter Five, this categorisation applies to the HHA's relationships with the Treasury and Inland Revenue during the 1980s in particular.

III. The 'heritage industry' and social hierarchy

The relative dearth of literature on the status of the aristocracy at the turn of the twenty-first century reflects both their relative obsolescence as a social class in contemporary Britain and the desire to redress an imbalance by turning historical attention away from elites. With the exception of those mentioned above, histories of the aristocracy's fate after 1945 are predominantly polemical accounts, either criticising aristocrats' continued wealth and political influence or defending it.[24] In the 1960s, Anthony Sampson noted that a title was a barrier to overt positions of political power, but presented different (and still powerful) opportunities to exert political

[22] M. J. Smith, 'The Agricultural Policy Community' in D. Marsh, *Policy Networks in British Government* (Oxford, 1992), p. 32.
[23] J. J. Richardson and A.G. Jordan, *Governing Under Pressure: The Policy Process in a Post-Parliamentary Democracy* (Oxford, 1979; repr. Oxford, 1985), pp. 55–57.
[24] E.g. P. Worsthorne, *In Defence of the Aristocracy* (London, 2004); L. James, *Aristocrats* (London, 2009); C. Bryant, *Entitled: A Critical History of the British Aristocracy* (London, 2017).

influence.[25] In the 1990s, left-leaning critics were concerned that these opportunities were too far entrenched in an allegedly meritocratic society, pointing to the continued existence of hereditary peerages as evidence of the aristocracy's unyielding grip on political power.[26] It is telling that the country house has become a far more fashionable subject of study than its owners, and that the aristocracy's survival and modern relevance is often judged by how many aristocrats have held onto their family seats.[27]

Much of the existing commentary on the cultural status of the country house is highly politically charged, and none more so than the literature that responded to, and effectively created the concept of, the 'heritage industry'. Patrick Wright's *On Living in and Old Country* (1985) and Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry* (1987) were the most influential texts in this genre during the 1980s. They were written in reaction to the sense that Britain's culture was being subsumed by the past due to the overwhelming success of its museums. In the more polemical of the two arguments, Hewison wrote that the manufacturing of 'heritage' had replaced the manufacturing industry; museums and heritage organisations represented 'a country obsessed with its past, and unable to face its future'.[28] In this analysis, country houses were symbolic of the perils of 'heritage', 'heritage' being the creation and representation of a hegemonic middle-class version of the past.[29] These ideas found further expression in the 1993 *Flogging a Dead Horse* exhibition in Manchester's Cornerhouse, which described museums as 'a curious by-product of Margaret Thatcher's free market triumphalism and the desire to make the past directly relevant to the cultural and financial realities of the present'.[30] In 1994, Raphael Samuel accused Wright and

[25] A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1962), pp. 12–16.
[26] Andrew Adonis, a Labour politician, and journalist Stephen Pollard argued that the peerage existed as a class maintained by institutions such as Eton and the House of Lords. See: A. Adonis and S. Pollard, *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* (London, 1997).
[27] E.g. Cannadine, *Decline and Fall* and E. A. Wasson, *Aristocracy and the Modern World* (Basingstoke, 2006).
[28] R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987), p. 9.
[29] In an earlier essay, Patrick Wright and Michael Bonnes contended that 'National Heritage is not history at all' and 'it needs to be analysed in its character as a publicly instituted structuring of consciousness'. See: P. Wright and M. Bonnes, 'Charms of residence: the public and the past', in R. Johnson (ed), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London, 1982), p. 266. The connections between criticisms of the heritage industry as nostalgic conservatism and declinist discourse are discussed in Chapter Four.
[30] P. Reas, and S. Cosgrove, *Flogging a Dead Horse: Heritage Culture and its Role in Post-Industrial Britain*, (Manchester, 1993), unpaginated.

Hewison of assuming that historical change is engineered by ruling elites and consumed by a passive public.[31] He argued that heritage is constantly evolving and is connected to 'a great mass of pre-existing sentiment' that cannot necessarily be identified with either the political Left or Right. Ruth Adams has argued that the 'heritage industry critique' is nevertheless 'a fairly accurate critique of the country house lobby's activities in the late twentieth century', despite lacking universal applicability for the rest of the 'heritage industry'.[32] Adams analysed the networks and impetus behind the V&A's significant *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition, to demonstrate how 'a potent combination of persuasive and emotive rhetoric, forceful personalities and the authority of established institutions can construct and deploy an idea of heritage that becomes hegemonic henceforward'.[33] An extension of this analysis to include the political relationships that underlay the country house lobby's efforts to oppose the wealth tax in 1974 is given in Chapter Three of this study, and enables a more thorough understanding of the exhibition's role in influencing public and political opinion. The exhibition was significant as an influence on political and public opinion, but—contrary to many accounts—it was not the critical impetus for the policy changes of the mid-1970s.

Chapter outlines

The 1950 Gowers Report on the future of Britain's buildings of 'outstanding historic or architectural interest' is considered a pivotal statement on the significance of Britain's country houses, although few of its recommendations were implemented at the time. Chapter One details how the Report originated with the personal commitment of two Labour Chancellors who were particularly concerned with protecting the country's historic landscape and buildings, including those owned by the aristocracy, despite a concurrent commitment to the redistribution of wealth. In the wake of two world wars, a romanticised image of the country house's place in national

[31] R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994), p. 264.
[32] R. Adams, 'The V&A, the Destruction of the Country House and the Creation of 'English Heritage'', *Museum & Society*, 11/1 (2013), p. 2.
[33] Adams, 'Destruction of the Country House', pp. 13–14.

culture and identity played no small part in the Attlee government's commitment to historic preservation. Nevertheless, and contrary to the Gowers Report's recommendations, both Attlee's and Churchill's governments rejected targeted tax exemptions for private historic house owners. Historic Buildings Councils were introduced as the primary means of ensuring built heritage preservation, through grants and listing. The Councils were predisposed toward aiding country houses, as detailed in Chapter Two, but could only aid the houses in the greatest need due to limited funds. Out of necessity, owners turned to opening their houses to tourists in order to maintain them. With limited alternative leisure options available, the public popularity of country houses soared. The first lobbying union of country house owners was rooted in tourism, under the British Travel Association (later British Tourist Authority). This focus on tourism shaped the future of what became the HHA in 1973; the HHA considered public access a prerequisite for tax exemptions.

It took the threat of a financial crisis for privately owned country houses in the mid-1970s, in the form of the Labour Party's pre-election commitment to a wealth tax in 1973/74, before exemptions were introduced to protect "significant" historic houses from the full effects of estate duty (which became Capital Transfer Tax). Chapter Three argues that the heritage campaigns of 1974/75 did not convince the Labour government that privately owned country houses required public subsidy, contrary to the commentary of contemporaries and subsequent histories of these events. The conditional exemption from Capital Transfer Tax for heritage land and buildings introduced in 1975 was intended as a temporary measure until a permanent solution could be found. The government allowed that temporary measure to stay in place because they failed to find a better solution, and not because the Labour Party had accepted that historic house owners ought to receive tax exemptions. While conditional exemption became less significant in the 1980s, with the ability to avoid IHT under the seven-year rule, its expansion in 1975 set a crucial precedent for special treatment of historic houses under capital taxation policy.

Chapter Three also contextualises the rapid professionalisation of the country house lobby alongside the activities of other heritage campaign organisations, such as the Georgian Group and SAVE Britain's Heritage. This chapter argues that the economic and architectural

value of country houses became more widely accepted, particularly by the middle classes, during the 1970s. However, country houses were at a political disadvantage when compared to the subjects of the new heritage campaigns of this period, many of which were explicitly seeking to redress an imbalance between the government's support of 'elite' heritage and the built heritage of 'ordinary' people. Within this context, lobbyists were required to present the country house as nationally significant with universal social utility, continually reaffirming its social value. This has been one of the key features of lobbying on behalf of the country house since the 1980s, as discussed in Chapters Five and Seven.

The tension between the economic efficiency of heritage-related policy and how it may be perceived by the public is a crucial dynamic in this history, and it is explored through the sale of Mentmore Towers in Chapter Four. Heritage campaigners' much-publicised criticisms of the government's failure to purchase this "threatened" country house prompted the government to provide independently administered funds to enable quicker responses to future country house "crises". The Thatcher government introduced the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which prioritised funding for privately owned country houses when the other significant quango introduced in this period, English Heritage, focused on funding the most publicly accessible projects. This funding dynamic is detailed in Chapter Five, which demonstrates the decisive influence of the civil service in shaping policy decisions affecting privately owned historic buildings during the 1980s. The creation of both quangos was part of a wider shift towards privatisation of public services in Britain, which continued through the 1990s and into New Labour's governments.

The prominence of country houses in film and other media in the 1980s contributed to increasing appreciation of the country house ensemble both domestically and internationally. The scale and popularity of the 1985 *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition in Washington, D.C. demonstrated the elevated cultural status of British country houses, as discussed in Chapter Five. The rapid growth of the international art market in the 1980s enabled substantial financial retrenchment for those private owners who possessed rare artworks and furniture, transforming the financial situation of many of the largest country houses. The phenomenon of the 'country

house sale', i.e. chattels auctions on a larger and more polished scale than ever before, contributed to this process. The sales, at their height during the 1980s and 1990s, demonstrate that the country house as a concept held significant cultural and economic value.

When Heritage Lottery funding was introduced in 1994, the initial exclusion of privately owned historic houses indicated that the focus of public support for heritage was moving away from country houses. Chapter Six argues that a culture of antipathy toward aristocratic wealth was prevalent among government ministers and within the civil service, including within the new Department for National Heritage. This marked a cultural shift within the department that dealt with historic preservation (then the Department for National Heritage, but previously the Department for the Environment), which had previously exerted internal pressure on the Treasury and Inland Revenue in favour of targeted concessions for privately owned heritage (as outlined in Chapter Five).

Chapter Seven argues that critics have exaggerated the extent to which the first Blair ministry diminished the role of 'heritage' in Britain, but the late 1990s was nevertheless a period of political uncertainty for private country house owners. When the system of conditional exemption for heritage buildings and chattels was publicly challenged on the grounds that owners were failing to meet their public access obligations, the HHA and allied heritage bodies found themselves restating the basic case for financial protection of privately owned historic buildings, which had gone essentially unchallenged since 1976. The subsequent continuation of the scheme with only minor adjustment demonstrates that it was still considered the most financially efficient method of preservation. However, the incident also demonstrated the political difficulty of granting asset-rich aristocrats further concessions, however cash-poor they may be. Towards the end of the twentieth century, private owners and the HHA were fighting a well-entrenched belief that the future of country houses in Britain was now secure.

Chapter One

The Post-War Country House and the Gowers Report, 1950–53

On 23 June 1950, a report on the future of Britain's buildings of 'outstanding historic or architectural interest' (the Gowers Report) was published under Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government. Country houses, which the Gowers Committee described as—among other things—an irreplaceable national asset, were the primary focus of its recommendations. Firstly, the Committee recommended the creation of statutory bodies to oversee the preservation of historic houses. These bodies would designate houses that ought to be protected, and the Committee suggested that those houses 'should, so far as possible, be preserved as private residences occupied preferably by the families connected with them'.[1] Further, and more controversially, the Committee recommended that owner-occupiers of these designated houses receive extensive tax reliefs if they opened their houses to the public. In doing so, the Gowers Commission placed the continuation of ancestral private ownership of country houses at the centre of their proposals.

The recommendation that the asset-rich owners of country houses should be allowed special tax exemptions was radical, and it was given at a moment of flux for Britain's country houses. Many that had been occupied by the army in wartime were in a parlous state. However, wartime damage was only one item in a list of obstacles to country house maintenance that had been growing steadily for at least a century. Emerging from war under a Labour government with an egalitarian agenda, country house owners were abandoning their ancestral homes in droves. In a radio broadcast entitled 'The Future of the English Country House' in July 1950, James Lees-Milne informed his audience that, since the war, 'about fifty country houses which the National Trust would consider worth protecting have either been pulled down or are condemned to be pulled down'.[2]

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[1] E. Gowers, *Report of the Committee on Houses of Outstanding Historic or Architectural Interest* (London, 1950), p. 49.
[2] 'The Future of the English Country House – Talk by James Lees-Milne' script, 29 July 1950, BBC Written Archives Centre, R9/6/262, p. 1.

The government of 1945-51 has been described as the climax of the British labour movement for its establishment of the modern welfare state and nationalisation of many public services.[3] It operated within the context of a bankrupt economy and was short-lived in comparison to the thirteen years of Conservative government that followed from October 1951. Under the tenure of this ambitious Labour government, the state extended its reach over historic preservation, dedicating resources and personnel to the listing of historic buildings and to their purchase and upkeep by government departments. Simultaneously, it weakened the financial position of private historic house owners by increasing the burden of taxation on the rich. When considering how best to preserve Britain's historic buildings, Attlee's government prioritised total public acquisition, with the goal of total public access. The Gowers Report—published only sixteen months before the Attlee government's dissolution—would change the terms of debate, although the majority of its recommendations were not substantially implemented until 1976.

This chapter outlines the circumstances under which the Gowers Committee received its commission, contextualising their recommendations within architectural and preservation literature of the first half of the twentieth century. It then discusses the Committee's activities and its recommendations, before considering how those recommendations were received by both the outgoing Labour government and their Conservative successors. While the context of the Gowers Committee's appointment and recommendations are well known, this chapter offers new analysis of the events underlying the protracted delay between the Committee's Report in 1950 and the 1953 Historic Buildings Act.

The country house amid the rise of preservation and modernism

The first half of the twentieth century was not only a period of significant change for the financial situation of country houses, but also for the way that country houses were perceived. The Gowers Report presented the historical importance of country houses as well-established and indisputable,

[3] K. O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945–51* (Oxford, 1985), p. vii.

but writings about these buildings as a significant cultural entity had appeared only relatively recently. In his extensive coverage of the Gowers Report and its origins, Peter Mandler has described how the Report was 'working against the established policy and social attitudes of the preceding decade'.[4] This established (although still new) policy attitude was that a house deemed historically significant should be preserved via public acquisition. Therefore, the path of least resistance toward state support of country house preservation appeared to be the separation of house and owner: the Gowers Report's recommendation that the state support *owners*, and its defence of the continued association of *house and owner together* as historically valuable (rather than the entity of the house, collections, and amenity land alone) was controversial.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a literary motif emerged in which the country house was emblematic of an idyllic rural past. Slowly, from the imposition of an Estate Duty with steeper rates in 1894, and increasingly after the First World War, the country house developed a symbolic resonance as a representation of the 'old England' that was seen to be threatened. In an analysis of the genre of twentieth-century British country-house novels, Christine Guedon-DeConcini has described this as the establishment of an 'idealized, ruralist England of the imagination' in art, literature and popular culture; this England was 'imbued with nostalgia for a supposedly lost world of order, stability, continuity and pastoral beauty'.[5] This romanticisation of the country house was not unchallenged, even by those who drove it. In *The Disinherited* (1934) and *Rebecca* (1938), the fictional houses created by Elizabeth Bowen and Daphne du Maurier were beyond rescue; their characters mourned what had been lost, but did not believe that the houses could or should be returned to their former glory.[6] Nevertheless, even these pessimistic views of the future of the country house asserted its significance in national history.

Ancestral families' histories of inhabiting and shaping country houses was a central theme of these literary representations. As Simon Murray has argued, E. M. Forster's, Virginia

[4] P. Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (London, 1997), p. 344.
[5] C. Guedon-DeConcini, 'Visions and Revisions of the National Past in the British Country-House Novel, 1900–2001' (Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 2008), p. 1.
[6] Bowen wrote about the Irish Big House in *The Disinherited* and du Maurier's *Rebecca* was centred around an English country house. See: A. Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010), pp. 252–3.

Woolf's and Evelyn Waugh's fiction fostered the notion of the aristocracy's continued centrality in rural communities.[7] In this way, it was not merely the house itself that was being lost to history, but the "way of life" associated with it. The fictional country house at the centre of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) is described as 'one of the most ancient in Britain'.[8] Woolf is vague in her physical description of the house; evoking the 'ghosts' of Orlando's ancestors rather than providing architectural details. It was the accumulation of centuries of aristocratic life in the house that she romanticised, not simply the house's original design. Alexandra Harris has described how Woolf's followers felt betrayed by *Orlando*; in it, Woolf—their fount of impersonal, modernist thought—extolled the sentimental virtues of the 'eccentric, excessive history of the English country house'. This was part of what Harris describes as Woolf's creation of 'a new kind of art which involved the passionate recuperation of the personal and of the past'.[9] In Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), a country house is similarly a store of intensely personal sentiments through which the house and its history is exalted. The character of Hooper, a subaltern in Charles Ryder's regiment, embodies the modern British man, who (in Ryder's mind) seeks to destroy everything that Brideshead represents. This includes, to Ryder's horror, the aristocracy. Waugh's panegyric to the country-house-dwelling aristocracy was an anomaly in the 1940s; after the war, novelists responding to the now-well-established cliché of the country house as emblematic of the nation's history more often satirised than defended it. In Marghanita Laski's satirical novel of 1948, *Tory Heaven*, the upper-class hero James Leigh-Smith arrives at the ancestral home of the woman he hopes to marry, and finds it 'magnificent' in its unique amalgamation of architectural styles that evidences the alterations made by successive ancestors: 'a superb and wholly British piece of pure sharawaggi'.[10] Although they had very different intentions, Laski, Waugh and

[7] S. Murray, 'The Rescue of the Country House: the role of the National Trust and its Country Houses Scheme' (unpublished paper, delivered 15 June 2018, Country Houses Between the Wars conference, Lamport Hall).
[8] Virginia Woolf*, Orlando* (London, 1928), first chapter.
[9] A. Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010), pp. 60–64.
[10] Marghanita Laski, *Tory Heaven,* or, *Thunder on the Right* (London, 2018), p. 163.

Woolf all emphasised the (perceived) value of the physical remnants of many generations of a single family united in one building.

Country houses were increasingly prevalent in architectural scholarship in these years. In particular, *Country Life* magazine was enormously influential in fostering the growing romantic symbolism of the country house. Christopher Hussey (1899-1970) was key in this process. He joined the magazine in 1921, became its editor in 1933, and remained highly influential over its content and political stance for the rest of his life.[11] For Hussey, the architectural styles displayed in country houses indicated the intellectual spirit of the time in which they were built. In a lecture he gave to the Tewksbury branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England during the 1950s, Hussey spoke of the 'humanising effect of the great country house age'—meaning the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries—on the 'treeless Brutality' of medieval England.[12] As early as 1928, *Country Life* was espousing the view that country houses (the examples they gave were Knole, Castle Howard and Chatsworth) 'should be entirely relieved from Death Duties, local rates and taxes', because they were 'priceless national possessions in which the continuity of life should be preserved'.[13] In a 1956 House of Lords debate on the future of historic houses, the Duke of Sutherland claimed that '[w]e have all read Mr. Hussey's delightful articles on old houses in Country Life and other papers'; by the 1950s, Hussey's work was a definitive reference point for anyone interested in country houses.[14] In the 1930s and '40s, Ralph Dutton's *The English Country House* (1935), Frederick Gibberd's *The Architecture of England* (1938), and Sacheverell Sitwell's *British Architects and Craftsmen* (1945), among other works, all celebrated the architecture of country houses. Margaret Jourdain's innovative studies of eighteenth-century furniture, the first of which she published in 1914, generated interest in the interiors of the country houses that Jourdain had visited for her research.[15] By the time that the Gowers Report was commissioned in

[11] S. Thurley, *Men from the Ministry: How Britain Saved its Heritage* (New Haven, 2013), p. 179.
[12] "Typescripts various" 1950/57, 'Tewkesbury CPRE', Scotney Castle, Hussey archives: 2/2/6/11.
[13] 'Such as Knole', *Country Life*, 63/1620 (4 Feb. 1928), p. 134.
[14] Hansard, HL Deb 5 July 1956, vol 198, c546.
[15] Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, pp. 70–71.

1948, studies of the architecture and contents of country houses were no longer difficult to come by.

This growing scholarly interest in country houses was tied to increased political agitation on behalf of Georgian architecture. Before 1946, the government's official "cut off point" for preservation of historic buildings was those built before 1714, under the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.[16] The Georgian Group was formed as a channel of the Society of Protection for Ancient Buildings, in response to the destruction of a succession of monumental eighteenth-century buildings, particularly in London.[17] These included Carlton House Terrace, the Adelphi, the Foundling Hospital, and—in the year of the Group's foundation, 1937—Chesterfield House, designed by Isaac Ware.[18] William Whyte has described how a newfound appreciation of Georgian architecture was compatible with the English adoption of the modern movement in architecture; admirers of Georgian and modernist architecture shared a dislike of Victorian architecture, and the perceived Englishness of Georgian architecture inspired the adoption of modernism as a style that could be imbued with an English character despite its continental associations. In this way, the English preservation movement was partly inspired by the myth of an indigenous English modernism that had roots in Georgian architecture.[19] Preservation of country houses, then, was a modern fixation as well as a conservative one: many of the country houses that were celebrated in this period were neo-classical buildings designed by eighteenth-century English and Scottish architects such as Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor, Talman and the Adam brothers. The works of John Summerson, curator of Sir John Soane's Museum, including *Georgian London* (1946) and *Architecture in Britain, 1550–1850* (1956) were key publications in this movement.[20] Summerson himself has often been described as an embodiment

[16] From 1946, listing and protection of historic buildings was extended to those dating from before (approximately) 1850. See: Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 183.
[17] N. Shashore, 'Georgian Group, founding members of (1937–c.1947)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* (Oxford, Apr. 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.97269 (21 Jan. 2022).
[18] G. Stamp, 'How We Celebrated the Coronation: The Foundation and Early Years of the Georgian Group', *The Georgian Group Journal*, 20 (2012), pp. 3–5.
[19] W. Whyte, 'The Englishness of English Architecture', Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927–1957', *Journal of British Studies,* 48/2 (2009), pp. 454; 441–2.
[20] M. Girouard, 'Summerson, Sir John Newenham (1904–1992)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, May 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47466 (23 Jul. 2021)

of the links between modernism and the appreciation of eighteenth-century architecture, because of his involvement with the Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group, which joined architects and architectural critics in support of modernist architecture in Britain.[21] By 1948, Georgian houses such as Wentworth Woodhouse and Stourhead had joined Tudor buildings like Hardwick Hall and Knole in the ranks of England's most admired houses.[22] In *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Waugh's eponymous house was an eighteenth-century pile complete with portico, dome and colonnade. Preserving these exemplars of eighteenth-century architecture would preserve the evidence of "Englishness" (which might also mean "Britishness", and vice versa) that modernist architects sought to channel in the twentieth century. Georgian architecture was even more directly channelled in neo-Georgian architecture, which Alan Powers has described as the dominant architectural style from before 1914 until as late as 1960.[23]

The new wave of scholarship celebrating Georgian architecture in the 1940s and 1950s not only emphasised the value of Georgian country houses, but of the designed landscapes surrounding them. Christopher Hussey's work was key in cultivating this interest. His writings on the Picturesque, an aesthetic ideal popularized in the late-eighteenth century in which artistic compositions of the were prized, contributed to the acceptance of the notion that a country house ought to be preserved as one entity with its surrounding landscape. In promoting the Picturesque, and asserting its relevance to modern design, Hussey and his ex-colleague at *Country Life,* Dorothy Stroud, popularised the landscapes designed by Capability Brown (c.1716–1783) for British country houses during the eighteenth century. Stroud's 1950 biography of Brown was a landmark publication in this process.[24] In his 1955 Reith lecture series on 'The Englishness of English Art', the influential architectural scholar Nikolaus Pevsner said that there was 'an English national planning theory in existence which need only be recognized and developed' through

[21] E. Darling, "A live and universal language': the Georgian as motif in interwar English architectural modernism' in J. Holder and E. McKellar (eds), *Neo-Georgian Architecture 1880-1970: A Reappraisal* (Swindon, 2016), p. 167.
[22] These houses were cited in the Gowers Report as exemplary country houses.
[23] A. Powers, 'Quality in Quality Street: Neo-Georgian and its place in architectural history' in *Neo-Georgian Architecture 1880–1970*, p. 14.
[24] Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown* (London, 1950).

study of eighteenth-century writers on the Picturesque—the Picturesque being England's unique contribution to planning.[25] As Oliver Cox has shown, this conviction had advocates in government. Capability Brown's gardens were continually referenced as examples of best practice in Britain by politicians debating what principles should be followed in post-war reconstruction schemes.[26] Renewed interest in the eighteenth century, then, was crucial to the expansion, romanticisation and promotion of the concept and architectural category of the country house after the First World War.

The Attlee government and the Gowers Report

Preservation was an important part of the Labour government's post-war vision of Britain from Attlee's government's inception, when Hugh Dalton was Chancellor. Dalton established a National Land Fund (NLF), which was 'designed to increase the National Estate', from surplus war stocks of £50 million in 1946.[27] He was partly motivated by his disappointment that so little land had been accepted by the Inland Revenue in lieu of death duties since the provision to do so had been introduced under the 1910 Finance Act; land had only been accepted twice in that thirty-six-year period.[28] As a keen walker and one-time President of the Ramblers' Association, Dalton intended the Fund to be used for the protection of parks and landscapes, rather than country estates and their houses specifically. He was a great supporter of the National Trust (NT), which he believed his government ought to support as an excellent example of 'Practical Socialism in action'.[29] As he described in his 1946 Budget speech:

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[25] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art: An Expanded and Annotated Version of the Reith Lectures Broadcast in October and November 1955* (London, 1956), p. 168.
[26] O. Cox, 'Why Celebrate Capability Brown? Responses and Reactions to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, 1930–2016', *Garden History*, 44/1 (2016), pp. 6–7.
[27] Hansard, HC Deb 9 April 1946, vol 421, c1839.
In 1949, an Ulster Land Fund was created for Northern Ireland, which was not covered by the 'National' Land Fund.
[28] Hugh Dalton, *High Tide and After: Memoirs, 1945–60* (London, 1962), p. 117.
[29] Idem, *Practical Socialism for Britain* (London, 1935), pp. 291-2; B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London, 1985), p. 456.

> The Fund might well be used to help such bodies as the National Trust, the Youth Hostels Association, the Ramblers' Associations and many other such societies, whose purpose is not to make profit, but to open the country to the people and to facilitate recreation, open air sport, and physical fitness.[30]

As this statement shows, facilitating public recreation was the motivating goal of state-sponsored support for preservation. Dalton explicitly stated that the fund was intended to preserve the best of Britain's natural scenery to 'become the heritage, not of a few private owners, but of all our people and, above all, of the young and the fit'.[31]

Such a substantial fund had the potential to transform the state's involvement in historic building preservation in Britain. As Mandler has highlighted, the annual interest on the NLF represented approximately four times the Arts Council budget. Under Labour's plans, it could be applied to the purchase of any land the Chancellor deemed worthy of acquisition.[32] Although Dalton did not have country houses in mind when he set up the NLF, they received much of the immediate attention of the Ministry of Works (MOW) and the NT. When the money became available, several houses that the NT had been vying to acquire for years through its Country Houses Scheme could suddenly be purchased. In 1947, Cotehele in Cornwall was the first house to be accepted under the Fund in lieu of death duties, whereupon it was transferred to the Trust.[33] A year later, the MOW leased Ham House, near Richmond in London, from the NT in order to use it as an outpost of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Dalton defended this decision by claiming that he 'would like to see the development of a taste for this sort of thing, with a desire on the part of the people from the Midlands to go to a place like Ham House in order to discover something worth while [sic]'.[34] This "public-spirited" attitude towards preservation was, therefore, not quite so straightforward as a desire to provide public access to land: it had a paternalistic edge.

Under the NT's 1937 Country Houses Scheme, country house owners gifted their houses to the NT, usually (although not always) accompanied by a significant tax-free endowment, under

[30] HC Deb 9 April 1946, vol 421, c1839.
[31] Ibid., c1840.
[32] Mandler, *Fall and Rise,* p. 335.
[33] Ibid., p. 338.
[34] Hansard, HC Deb 23 February 1948, vol 447, c1678.

the condition that the family and their heirs would continue to live in the house as tenants at a "market rate". Crucially, therefore, the houses acquired under this scheme continued to function as ancestral family homes, but with the responsibility for maintenance and the threat of death duties removed. The Scheme was largely shaped by Philip Kerr, Lord Lothian, a Liberal politician and diplomat whose speech at the NT's 1934 Annual General Meeting is often cited. In 1937, Lothian exercised considerable influence over British foreign policy. He had served as Under-Secretary of State for India in 1931–2, and entertained Nehru at his own country house, Blickling Hall (one of the four houses he inherited), which he later bequeathed to the NT.[35] In his 1934 speech, Lothian stated that he intended to initiate government policy that would 'preserve not only the buildings, but their surroundings, contents and, so far as might be, the kind of life they stand for'.[36] Lothian helped to steer the Act through the House of Lords, via a Private Member's Bill, and it became law in July 1937.[37] Blickling Hall was one of the earliest houses to be offered to the NT. Others included Corsham Court, bequeathed by Lord Methuen, another Liberal peer; and Wallington Hall, donated by Sir Charles Trevelyan, who had served in Ramsay MacDonald's Labour cabinets. Mandler has written of the NT's fears that these early offers from Liberal and Labour politicians would make the majority of owners suspicious of the scheme.[38] Despite these fears, by 1945 the NT owned seventeen large country houses, nine of which were still inhabited by the families of donors.[39]

A Labour Chancellor known for his exceptionally strong emphasis on redistributive policies, Hugh Dalton was no obvious friend to the private country estate owner. In his Budget of autumn 1945, Dalton increased the maximum rate of estate duty by ten percentage points, to seventy-five per cent, and removed the duty entirely from estates of two thousand pounds or less.[40] His term as Chancellor was, however, short—partly because he was held responsible for the

[35] A. May, 'Kerr, Philip Henry, eleventh marquess of Lothian (1882–1940)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Jan. 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34303 (18 Sep. 2019).
[36] 'The Future of Country Houses', *Country Life*, 76/1958 (28 Jul. 1934), p. 80.
[37] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 182.
[38] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 305.
[39] P. Wright, *A Journey through Ruins* (London, 1993), pp. 79, 89.
[40] In his memoir, Dalton stated that these changes were motivated by the belief that an immoderate inheritance would tempt a man to 'become lazy and thriftless'. See: Dalton, *High Tide and After*, p. 116.

economic troubles of 1947.[41] His successor, Stafford Cripps (Chancellor from 13 November 1947 until 18 October 1950), began his political career on the extreme left of the Labour Party, despite his wealthy background. As Chancellor, Cripps was remembered for his austerity measures.[42] However, he also introduced redistributive measures. In 1949, he abolished Succession and Legacy Duties, which he believed overcomplicated the system of tax upon inheritance and imposed a proportionately heavier burden on the small than on the large estate.[43] He raised the top rate of estate duty still further, to eighty per cent on estates worth over one million pounds.[44] These changes combined to increase the tax burden on the inheritor of a (theoretically) valuable country house.

The decision to increase the top rate of estate duty was a seemingly curious act for a Chancellor who had strong ties to country houses. Cripps grew up at Parmoor House in the Chilterns, where he had greatly enjoyed country pursuits.[45] Writing in his diary in 1910, in his early twenties, he admitted that he wanted 'to have a country home' although he felt it was wrong to desire money.[46] This youthful desire to possess his own country house may have contributed to Cripps' concern about the precarious post-war status of Britain's historic buildings. One of his early actions was to instruct the MOW to provide the Treasury with a list of historically and architecturally important houses that ought to be preserved at all costs. The Ministry produced a list of fifty-two 'important country houses' in private ownership. The government did not intend to abandon their taxation policies, but they did acknowledge that those policies had resulted in an increase in the number of historic houses threatened by sale or destruction, without a state-sponsored safety net to save the houses 'for the nation'. The next step Cripps took was to appoint a committee to assess what might be done for the preservation of historically and architecturally important houses.

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[41] Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, pp. 451–74.
[42] P. Clarke and Richard Toye, 'Cripps, Sir (Richard) Stafford (1889–1952), politician and lawyer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Jan. 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32630 (16 Jul. 2019)
[43] HC Deb 6 April 1949, vol 463, cc2088–90.
[44] Brendon Sewill, *Treasure on Earth: A Study of Death Duties* (London, 1960), p. 3.
[45] P. F. Clarke, *The Cripps Version: The Life of Sir Stafford Cripps, 1889–1952* (London, 2002), p. 5.
[46] Ibid., p. 6.

In an internal meeting of 23 July 1948, the MOW discussed the Chancellor's proposal of this new committee and stipulated that 'members of the committee would not be representatives of particular interests and care would be taken to appoint persons who would not make extravagant recommendations'.[47] Ernest Gowers, a veteran civil servant, was appointed Chairman and the Committee began work on 10 December 1948. Gowers was known as the author of *Plain Words*, a writing style manual used across the civil service, and for his distinguished career across the Board of the Inland Revenue, the Treasury, and the India Office. Alongside this commission on preservation, he chaired important inquiries such as the Royal Commission into Capital Punishment and the Coal Mines Reorganisation Commission.[48]

While Gowers was appointed for his skill as a manager, most of the other Committee members had some historical or architectural background. They included Anthony Blunt, the eminent art historian, Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures; Cyril Fox, an archaeologist and previously Director of the National Museum of Wales; W. H. Ansell, an architect who had served as President of the Royal Institute of British Architects; John Carruthers Little, former president of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and industrial commissioner for the Ministry of Labour; and Mr John D. Imrie, City Chamberlain of Edinburgh.[49] The latter two appointments, in particular, demonstrated a concern to include individuals who represented a range of experience and knowledge of governance at all levels—not only professional aesthetes. When James Lees-Milne, Secretary of the NT's Country Houses Committee, met Ava, Lady Anderson (Viscountess Waverley), to discuss her appointment to the commission in December 1948, he found her 'abysmally ignorant' of the NT, although 'well disposed' to it. She did 'not even know the terms of reference of her Commission'.[50] Mandler has argued that the Committee members were too neutral: so ignorant of the existing problems of preservation that they could be easily swayed by charismatic witnesses.[51] This was the result of

[47] 'Lord President's Committee', 23 Jul. 1948, TNA, HLG 126/16, p. 1.
[48] A. Scott, *Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds* (Basingstoke, 2009)
[49] Re: J. D. Imrie, see 'Sir John Imrie', *Times* (4 Jul. 1981), p. 14; Re: J. C. Little see: 'Mr. J. C. Little', *Times* (16 Sep. 1957), p. 14.
[50] James Lees-Milne, *Midway on the Waves* (London, 1985), p. 135.
[51] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 347.

an attempt to appoint individuals who were reasonably informed of historic preservation issues but without obviously vested interests. Such a group, pre-disposed towards greater funding for the arts, was likely to be convinced by the staunchest advocates for wide-ranging measures to protect country houses without great persuasion—particularly when tasked with considering the issue of historic houses in isolation, without concern for the repercussions of their financial recommendations for the rest of the tax system and economy.

The Committee visited twenty-six historic properties which, with the exceptions of three houses in Scotland—The Binns, the Hill of Tarvit, and Gladstone's Land in Edinburgh—were all in England.[52] The majority of the evidence they received was from government departments, and local and public authorities. However, they also received evidence from many voluntary associations, including the Georgian Group, the Country Landowners' Association, the NT and National Trust for Scotland (NTS), the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Royal Institute of British Architects. Over fifty 'private individuals', many of them titled historic house owners, addressed the Committee. These included the Dukes of Marlborough and Wellington, the Marquesses of Northampton and Salisbury, and Lords Methuen and Sackville. Some of the key figures associated with the twentieth-century "cult of the country house" gave evidence, including Christopher Hussey and Nancy Lancaster's ex-husband Ronald Tree. Ultimately, the Committee members showed no less bias in their methods than the experts might have done. They spoke only to those who most desired preservation of country houses, and did not seek out opposing views.

In the introductory remarks of their Report, the Gowers Committee repeated many of the phrases that these witnesses had used in their evidence. Paraphrasing the Duke of Wellington, Gerald Wellesley, and Christopher Hussey—who were close friends—the Report opened with unequivocal statements of country houses' value:

> It is not too much to say that these houses represent an association of beauty, of art and of nature — the achievement often of centuries of effort — which is irreplaceable, and

[52] Gowers, *Report*, p. 54.

> has seldom, if ever, been equalled in the history of civilisation. Certainly nowhere else are such richness and variety to be found within so narrow a compass.
> …
> They are a constant reminder of that grace and dignity which gave place a century or more ago to the ugly and squalid sprawl of our industrial towns and the mean and haphazard growth of many of our villages.[53]

The statement that country houses are an irreplaceable 'association of beauty, of art and of nature' that have seldom 'been equalled in the history of civilisation' is the most oft-cited phrase within the Gowers Report. This phrasing was a version of the Duke of Wellington's testimony to the Committee, that 'the English country house is the greatest contribution made by England to the visual arts'.[54] The latter quotation was also given in the Report's introductory section of 'The Case for Preservation', alongside several other acclamations of the English country house; immediately, the Committee's evidenced their concentration on the plight of the *English* country house, rather than its equivalents in Wales and Scotland.[55] This exaltation of the English country house, and the extremity of the Committee's statement that 'grace and dignity' had given way to 'the ugly and squalid sprawl of our industrial towns', combined to create an emotive and emphatic argument; the Gowers Committee had clearly been 'swayed' by their witnesses. If they felt the need to justify these statements, that justification was brief: the "case for preservation" was confined to two pages of their seventy-nine-page report. The Report stated that the Committee's 'paramount consideration [was] the aesthetic importance of these houses and their historic, educational and cultural value'. It noted that it was 'worth remembering' the economic value of the houses through tourism, but this was not at the centre of its appeal to governmental action.[56]

The Report's juxtaposition of the 'ugly and squalid sprawl' of industrial towns and the 'grace and dignity' of the countryside represented a conservative attitude to the landscape: a division between ruralism and urbanism. The 'squalid sprawl' that the Committee referred to was

[53] Gowers, *Report*, p. 3.
[54] Ibid., p. 3.
[55] The Committee's geographical remit did not include Northern Ireland, which had recently been the subject of legislation for the preservation of historic houses and ancient monuments. For the history of legislation in Ireland, see E. Crooke, *White Elephants: The Country House and the State in Independent Ireland, 1922–73* (Dublin, 2018).
[56] Gowers, *Report*, p. 3.

the rapid expansion of urban areas since 1850, which in turn necessitated new roads and petrol stations that were eyesores to many inhabitants of previously 'unspoiled' rural areas.[57] As geographer D. N. Jeans has argued, the 'squalid sprawl' of which the Committee wrote was inextricably linked to the process of the countryside, 'hitherto the recreational and aesthetic preserve of the gentry and middle class', being 'invaded by the urban masses'. As such, the countryside conservation movement was laden with class conflict.[58] The Town and Country Planning Act passed by Attlee's ministry in 1947 was intended to control the hitherto unconstrained development of urban and rural areas by introducing planning permission; until 1947, no additional permission beyond land ownership was necessary for development. Local authorities were given extensive development powers, and government funds were made available to facilitate them; the Act was a landmark for state control of development. In the development schemes that the Labour government took a direct role in shaping, such as the first New Town at Stevenage, which expanded the existing historic town, rural and urban elements were intended to be well balanced.[59] In line with Dalton's views, the government intended to safeguard the countryside as a public asset—but not as a private asset for landowners.

This "functionalist" view of architecture and planning had also been present among architectural critics during Churchill's war ministry. The catalogue for the Royal Institute of British Architects' 1943 exhibition 'Rebuilding Britain' at the National Gallery stated that planning would be needed on a national scale, to accompany social planning, and recommended the separation of areas according to function in order to provide for a 'full, varied and coherent social life'.[60] In this vision of Britain, some of the nation's country houses were 'interesting enough to be kept as museums', and others—with additions such as swimming baths, cafes and other amusements—could become holiday destinations or rest homes.[61] There was no question of maintaining country houses under the occupation of a single family. However, by 1950 few

[57] D. N. Jeans, 'Planning and the Myth of the English Countryside in the Interwar Period', *Rural History*, 1/2 (1990), p. 252.
[58] Ibid., p. 259.
[59] D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998; repr. London, 2016), pp. 280–4.
[60] Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), *Rebuilding Britain* (London, 1943), pp. 13, 28.
[61] RIBA, *Rebuilding Britain*, p. 51.

preservationist thinkers pitted the traditional, rural society against the modern and urban. In what cultural geographer David Matless has described as 'the planner-preservationist vision', sensitive modern design was intended to complement and aid preservation of historic rural buildings, villages and towns.[62] Matless views the 1951 Festival of Britain as the encapsulation of this national vision that aligned the modern and traditional, city and country.[63] The country house could be incorporated into modern Britain, 'preserved as a site of historic and aesthetic value only because its time had gone and would not come again'.[64]

The importance of the country house ensemble was one of the key features of the Gowers Report. The ensemble of the house, contents and gardens was not protected under existing preservation measures: there was 'no power under existing law to prevent the dispersal of the contents of a historic house'.[65] The Report recommended that it ought to be possible to list the contents of a house; owners would be required to notify the state of any planned dispersal of listed collections.[66] Mandler notes that Christopher Hussey 'vigorously asserted' the importance of the ensemble in his evidence to the Committee.[67] The Committee used his written statement and review of the current situation for historic houses as central evidence in their report, treating Hussey as the ultimate authority on country houses.[68] Nevertheless, it would be easy to overstate Hussey's influence on this aspect of the recommendations; the concept of the ensemble was also championed by other contemporary architectural writers. In his 1949 volume on the history of the NT, *On Trust for the Nation*, influential Welsh architect Clough Williams-Ellis highlighted the dangers of death duties and the gradual break-up of estates. As the architect who had converted Stowe House for use as a school in 1923, Williams-Ellis was cautiously optimistic that conversion of historic houses for public use was possible if done with great care. However, he emphasised that there was 'nothing so bitterly poignant to the amenity-minded as the sight of ancient

[62] Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 361.
[63] Ibid., p. 361.
[64] Ibid., p. 302.
[65] Gowers, *Report*, p. 14.
[66] Ibid., pp. 29–30.
[67] P. Mandler, 'Nationalising the Country House' in M. Hunter (ed), *Preserving the Past: The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain* (Stroud, 1996), p. 105.
[68] See: 'Evidence to the Committee: Christopher Hussey', 5 May 1949, TNA, T 277/72.

loveliness being stupidly and unnecessarily ravaged'. Affirming the idea of the 'loveliness of an ensemble', his concept of the country house was of something that 'could only be produced after generations of loving care and an immense expenditure of skillful labour'.[69] Even from the perspective of an architect whose vision for the preservation of country houses chimed with that of the Labour government, it was the ensemble that held most value.

Indeed, belief in the value of the country house ensemble had already been absorbed by the MOW, and by influential Lords such as Lothian, when the commission was conceived. The concept of preserving the country house as an entity was implicit in the commission, which came via the Treasury. Cripps' mandate for the Committee was to advise on 'what general arrangements might be made by the Government for the preservation, maintenance and use of houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest which might otherwise not be preserved, including, where desirable, the preservation of a house and its contents as a unity'.[70] Significantly, the Committee defined their use of the term 'house' to include 'amenity land', including 'gardens, parks, woods, and lakes' (defined as 'so much of the surrounding countryside as serves to set off the building', without extending to full estates). This chimed with the view of the country house as an 'association of art, beauty and nature': an aesthetic 'composition' of which the house was the central feature.[71] This interpretation of the brief was not an innovation of the Committee, but was recommended by the MOW in July 1948 and incorporated into Cripps' mandate (as quoted above).[72] This was one aspect of the Report's far-reaching recommendations that had not been determined by charismatic witnesses, but merely reinforced by them.

The Committee's key policy recommendation was that houses judged to be of sufficient historical or architectural significance 'should, as far as possible, be preserved as private residences occupied preferably by the families connected with them'.[73] They emphasised the value of a house's ancestral family emphatically, stating that much of the fascination of a visit to

[69] Clough Williams-Ellis and Barbara Jones, *On Trust for the Nation,* 2nd vol (London, 1949), p. 12.
[70] Gowers, *Report*, p. 1.
[71] Ibid., pp. 1-2.
[72] 'Draft Brief for the Minister: Preservation of Houses of Architectural or Historic Interest', 19 Jul. 1948, TNA, HLG 126/16.
[73] Gowers, *Report*, p. 49.

an historic house was the knowledge that the direct descendants of its famous historic owners still lived there.[74] Accordingly, they criticised the taxation of privately owned country houses heavily, stating that it was 'notorious' that the 'chief cause' of an owner's inability to maintain their house was taxation.[75] The Gowers Report claimed that, under the present taxation system, no individual country house owner would have much more than £5,000 to spend each year. Yet, many great houses required as much as £10,000 to maintain them 'on the minimum necessary to preserve them and their contents from deterioration'.[76] In 1950, any owner-occupier was entitled to tax relief on a five-year average of their repair expenditure.[77] The Gowers Committee supported the continuation of this measure, but recommended that the maintenance claim should be extended to cover 'expenses of occupation', including 'everything that is reasonably spent on maintaining the house, contents and amenity land': a significant expansion from repairs alone.[78] Their recommendations for tax relief were numerous, and blurred the lines between maintaining funds that would be put towards a house's upkeep and a house owner's general wealth. Although the Board of the Inland Revenue objected to targeted tax reliefs as a rule, the Board 'did not think it proper to give evidence before [the Committee]' because they were considering 'a question of policy'.[79] Therefore, the Committee could not respond to the Board's practical objections to their specific recommendations in their report, although they must have been aware of the Board's general opposition towards the proposals.

Another of the committee's central observations was the inadequacy of the existing preservation measures and their administration, including the (famously) slow progress of the listing process.[80] Listing had officially begun under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act,

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[74] Ibid., pp. 30–31.
[75] Ibid., p. 32.
[76] Ibid., p. 5.
[77] Ibid., p. 57.
[78] Ibid., p. 33.
[79] Ibid., pp. 31-32; Letter from E. S. J. Bamford (Inland Revenue) to Ernest Gowers, 13 May 1949, TNA, T 277/72.
Gowers described the Board of Inland Revenue's refusal to give evidence as 'nonsense'. See: Letter from Ernest Gowers to Cornelius Gregg, 19 January 1950, TNA, T 277/120.
[80] In June 1950, about 700 local authority districts (of 1,470 in total) had been surveyed. At that rate, full coverage was expected to take another five years. See: J. Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882–1996* (London, 1997), p. 70.

although lists of threatened buildings were compiled earlier. War damage accelerated the need for preservation, which ministers recognised in their initiation of the Salvage Scheme (an attempted complete survey of the nation's historic buildings) during the war.[81] The Committee claimed that delays in the listing progress had resulted in the destruction of many notable buildings, as listing was a prerequisite to the operation of local councils' preservation powers included in the 1947 Act.[82] Moreover, the overlapping responsibilities of the MOW and the Ministry of Town and Country Planning were deemed 'absurd' and counterproductive.[83] The Committee's proposed administrative remedy was the establishment of Historic Buildings Councils: one for England and Wales, and another for Scotland. These councils would become the central authorities for advising Government Departments, the planning authorities, and owners and other guardians on all matters relating to historic buildings and their contents. They would also absorb the National Buildings Record and take over the listing process. The separate body for Scotland would be necessary, they claimed, because of fundamental differences in the land tenure system, and 'differences of history and tradition'.[84] They left it to the Scottish authorities to determine how the Scottish Council might function, and its powers in relation to existing government departments. Whatever the particular arrangements might be, it was deemed important that the Councils retain a degree of independence. They should be entitled to make grants and loans for the repair and maintenance of historic buildings, of the sort that were regularly administered in France.[85]

Not only would these new bodies centralise state-sponsored preservation, but they would dramatically expand the severely limited "positive" (i.e. proactive rather than prohibitive) preservation measures that could be applied to historic houses. The principal form of positive preservation for the private owner of an historic property was the receipt of advice from the MOW. The Ministry was unable to contribute funds to owners who wished to repair their houses

[81] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 198.
[82] Gowers, *Report*, p. 10.
[83] N.B. Both were maintained until the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works was absorbed into the Department of the Environment in 1970. See Delafons, *Politics and Preservation*, p. 73.
[84] Gowers, *Report*, p. 20.
[85] Ibid., p. 38.

but had insufficient funds. Funding repair of an historic building, without acquiring it, was only possible if it was uninhabited. Overall, the committee concluded that the current legal measures for positive preservation on the part of the state were 'useless' for saving inhabited houses. They noted that the primary method of historic house preservation in recent years had been the Ministry's purchase of buildings for public use. Audley End, purchased in 1948 for use as a conference centre, was a recent example.[86] However, the house was never converted for this purpose, and its temporary opening as a museum became permanent. It subsequently exemplified the often-inhibitive cost of conversion, of which the Committee warned.[87] A danger of such acquisition, whether by the Ministry or local authorities, was that a house was chosen for preservation based solely on its suitability for current local needs, rather than its 'quality'. The Gowers Committee argued that an alternative to conversion for public use was necessary to preserve those 'outstanding' houses that were not conveniently located or easily adapted.

The committee did not explicitly adopt the notion that the 'continuity of life' or the country landowner's "way of life" ought to be preserved, but their recommendations supported the occupation and use of country houses as, primarily, homes. Their description of country houses as possessing 'an indefinable atmosphere as the centres of a highly civilised home life' carried elitist overtones, which permeated the Report despite the inclusion of a warning that the 'great country house can never again play the part it used to play in our social life'.[88] Accordingly, they prioritised owners' abilities to continue living in their houses above public access in their recommendations. Mandler has stated that the Gowers committee recommended tax relief 'more or less regardless of public access' (see above), which is a fair assessment given the flexibility in public opening that they recommended for owners.[89] They recommended that owner-occupiers of houses should be entitled to tax reliefs 'subject to showing their houses to the public'.[90] However, they did not specify a level of access that should be required, but added that they would

[86] Ibid., p. 16.
[87] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, pp. 186–7.
[88] Gowers, *Report*, p. 8.
[89] Mandler, 'Nationalising the Country House', p. 106.
[90] Gowers, *Report*, pp. xi, xiv.

'deprecate a uniform rule about the number of days on which a house must be shown', because this would be 'affected by a great many factors'.[91] There was an implication that the access required should not substantially change the owners' way of living in the house, particularly if the house was a smaller manor house that had not been open to the public historically.

Ultimately, the Report that the Gowers Committee produced reflected the views of the most passionate defenders of country houses at the time, whom they had consulted: the architectural writers such as Christopher Hussey; NT committee members, including James Lees-Milne and Viscount Esher; the Country Landowners' Association; and aristocrats who opened their own country houses to the public. Hussey told the Committee that,

> The principle should be adopted that the owners of great houses are performing a socially valuable function, and that they should be assured of the income, free of tax, required to meet the full cost of maintaining house, contents, and surroundings (garden and park), including the requisite staff, and of necessary structural repairs.[92]

The Committee's recommendations demonstrate that they had absorbed this view. In pursuance of making commercial opening tax-free, they explored the potential to remove income tax from visitor fees (under Schedule A). This was not one of the Committee's final recommendations, because the Inland Revenue informed them that this would be impossible.[93] The recommendations that the Committee did put forward in the Gowers Report were the most radical measures that (they believed) would be possible to introduce under the current taxation system.

Crucially, the terms of the Commission set up the Committee to make such radical recommendations; as discussed above, the Commission was established on the basis that it would determine the best measures for 'the preservation of a house and its contents as a unity', which included amenity land. With scant guidance from the Inland Revenue, and therefore limited awareness of the wider implications of wide-ranging financial concessions for the tax system; evidence from the country house's most outspoken advocates; and Committee members that were either predisposed to support preservation almost regardless of public cost or previously

[91] Ibid., p. 40.
[92] 'Written evidence by CH', undated, Scotney Castle, 2/2/6/6/1, Country life admin.
[93] Cases were judged individually, 'on their own merits', but open houses were subject to various levels of income tax depending on how they were categorised. See: Note from A. Parnis to the Gowers Committee, 15 Jun. 1949, TNA, T 277/72.

dispassionate on the issue, the Committee was guaranteed to recommend extensive (and costly) new measures to maintain country houses in private ownership. Senior Treasury minister Edward Playfair later commented that the Committee had been 'piqued' by the Board of the Inland Revenue's refusal to speak with them, and consequently 'went the whole hog' when proposing tax exemptions.[94]

The government's response to Gowers

It was three years before the government acted on the Gowers Report. Primarily, the delay was due to the general election of October 1951, which saw the Conservative party, led by Churchill, oust the Labour party from power. It was held a mere twenty months after Labour had won the election of February 1950 with a slim five-seat majority. These were not the stable political conditions that would facilitate preservation legislation. The process of reviewing the Committee's recommendations restarted, under a new set of political values.

The press reaction to the Gowers Report had been overwhelmingly favourable. The proposals for tax relief were welcomed by the *Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Yorkshire Post*, and the *Birmingham Post*—all Conservative papers. Immediate support also came from the *Scotsman* and the Welsh paper the *Western Mail.*[95] Many local papers reported on the recommendations neutrally, including the *Coventry Evening Telegraph,* the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* and the *Belfast News-Letter*.[96] The *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail* believed that 'any impartial reader' of the Report would agree that private house owners should be encouraged to remain in residence, and the *Nottingham Journal* was in sympathy with the Committee's belief

[94] Memo on The Gowers Report by Edward Playfair for Sir Edward Bridges (Permanent Secretary to the Treasury), 30 Nov. 1950, TNA, HLG 126/17, p. 4.
[95] 'Press Comment on the Gowers Report, 23rd June 1950', TNA, HLG 126/17.
[96] 'Plan to save Britain's historic homes', *Coventry Evening Telegraph* (23 Jun. 1950), p. 6; 'Stately homes of England: how can they be saved?', *Birmingham Gazette* (23 Jun. 1950), p. 6; 'Plan to save historic homes', *Belfast News-Letter* (23 Jun. 1950), p. 6.

that the existing taxation system would soon be the death of Britain's remaining stately homes.[97] Writing in the *Illustrated London News* in July 1950, Cyril Falls, Oxford Professor of the History of War, hoped for some remission of taxation as the Committee had recommended, as long as it was engineered to benefit those with the highest incomes as little as possible.[98] Later, in July 1952, the *Daily Mail* reported that forty of the 'between 300 and 400' houses that the NT had listed as outstandingly important (in their evidence to the Gowers Committee) had since 'disappeared'. This was lamentable because the houses were 'peculiarly British', and the achievement of 'a people' that included not only aristocrats but craftspeople.[99] This favourable reception from the press led several senior civil servants to express concern that any modification of the Gowers recommendations would face strong public opposition. Osmund Cleverly, Commissioner of Crown Lands, raised this concern in relation to a Treasury proposal to put the proposed Historic Buildings Councils' powers under the MOW (rather than create them as autonomous bodies accountable only to the Chancellor, as proposed by Gowers).[100] When outlining the Treasury's views on the Report, Edward Playfair warned that it 'would be a very contentious matter to shelve a report which has met with such widespread approval'.[101]

There was, however, enough criticism of the Report for *Country Life* magazine to describe the recommendations as 'unfashionable', and for an internal letter at the MOW in February 1951 to note that 'the Press in general doubted the wisdom of the tax proposals' (although these were both misleading statements).[102] Left-wing newspapers were the primary source of that criticism. The *Daily Worker*, which had been founded by the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1930, was (predictably) explicitly critical, and dismissed the Committee's scheme as 'handouts to gentry'.[103] The *Manchester Guardian* questioned the public benefit of giving back

[97] 'Stately home', *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail* (23 Jun. 1950), p. 2; 'Stately homes may be given reprieve from "death by taxation"', *Nottingham Journal* (23 Jun. 1950), p. 4.
[98] 'A Window on the World: "The Stately Homes of England"', *Illustrated London News* (15 Jul. 1950), p. 100.
[99] 'Time Will Not Wait', *Daily Mail* (5 Jul. 1952), p. 1.
[100] 'Note of a Meeting held at the Treasury on Monday, 23rd October, 1950: The Gowers Report on Houses of Outstanding Historic or Architectural Interest', TNA, HLG 126/17.
[101] Memo on The Gowers Report by Edward Playfair for Sir Edward Bridges
[102] 'The Country House Charter', *Country Life*, 108/2791 (14 Jul. 1950), p. 120; Letter from RW to E. W. Playfair, 2 Feb. 1951, TNA, HLG 126/18.
[103] 'Press Comment on the Gowers Report, 23rd June 1950'.

to the rich to maintain historic sites that many taxpayers would be unable to access. Their reporter summarised some of the main conflicts to which the Committee's recommendations gave rise,

> To put it brutally, the Chancellor is asked to be exceptionally charitable to one small category of wealthy people; or, to put it another way, to treat all wealthy people alike (which means, in the conditions of to-day, extremely roughly) and then to hand back to the owners of historic houses, after a little frisking with the regulations, a sum of perhaps £10 millions a year. Presumably he will recover this sum from the rest of the tax-payers elsewhere in his Budget. By an unhappy accident of geography most of these taxpayers live beyond visiting distance of all but a fraction of these stately homes … It is hard to say how the country as a whole will react to this report, one of whose seven signatories is, after all, a past president of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. The main purpose is unexceptionable. But it would be easier for a Conservative than a Labour Government to give it effect by legislation.[104]

This final assumption would prove to be wrong. Labour cabinet ministers rejected tax concessions on principle, but Conservative ministers did too.

In early July 1950, a few weeks after the report was published on 23 June, Conservative MP Arthur Colegate tabled a motion to extend the 1930 exemption from estate duty for objects of national, scientific, historic or artistic interest to buildings, as the Gowers Committee had recommended.[105] Chancellor Stafford Cripps' response was to state that he intended 'to allow time for the Report to be studied and discussed', so that the government might gauge the reaction of 'different sections of the population'. If legislation was necessary, Cripps hoped that the government would 'be able to undertake it next year'.[106] Beyond the initial press coverage of the Gowers Report's publication, the 'country as a whole' had little opportunity to react to the Report, as political events pushed it further down the political agenda.

Internal discussion of the proposals was a lengthy process. Simon Thurley has written that Whitehall greeted the Report with 'a chorus of disapproval' in 1950.[107] In broad strokes this is true, but there were several important civil servants who attempted to make the proposals work in some form. The Inland Revenue costed the Report's proposed tax concessions, which they

[104] 'Historic Houses', *Manchester Guardian* (23 Jun. 1950), p. 6.
[105] Hansard, HC Deb 4 July 1950, vol 477, cc281–7.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 193.

suggested would cover c.2,000 houses, at between £5 and £10 million annually, and consequently 'all Ministers who … looked at them … rejected the tax proposals'.[108] Edward Playfair, who co-ordinated the Treasury's response and recommendations regarding the Gowers Report, was 'unrepentantly on the side of some taxation concessions', but nevertheless advised that they were politically impossible.[109] In November 1950, he stated that the task was 'not to consider whether or not we can accept the proposals as they stand, but whether we can work out an austerity Gowers plan which shall be as cheap as possible and yet still worth doing'. He emphasised that the administrative reorganisation which had been proposed, and was being considered in detail, was pointless without funds for this machinery to administer. If no money could be found, he recommended shelving the Report 'for the time being'.[110] However, this was not his preferred option. Playfair lamented that the structure of country houses was 'deteriorating and their contents being dispersed day by day' and expressed his hope that ministers would be willing to consider a cheaper version of the scheme, focused initially on fewer than 150 houses, which might cost 'somewhere like £500,000 to £1,000,000 a year in all (excluding the capital cost of buying any houses)'.[111] Playfair's summary of the Treasury's response demonstrates that the initiative for realising the Gowers proposals was firmly with ministers; their unwillingness to forego taxation was a crucial stumbling block.

When Gaitskell replaced Cripps as Chancellor in 1950, it appeared to be the first of several fatal blows to the Gowers recommendations. Gaitskell did not 'weigh the opinions of different sections of the population' as Cripps had promised, and Members of both Houses began to ask why nothing had been done. In a debate that he raised in the Lords on 8 March 1951, Lord Methuen asked for a statement from the government on how they intended to respond to the Report that had been published nine months ago:

> The Report itself had a good Press from, I think I am right in saying, papers and periodicals representing all shades of political opinion. It is non-controversial. Your Lordships will remember that the Committee was asked to report on the best way of

[108] Memo on The Gowers Report by Edward Playfair for Sir Edward Bridges, p. 2.
[109] Letter of 31 October 1951 to Robert Willis (Inland Revenue), TNA, T 218/10.
[110] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[111] Ibid., p. 3.

> preserving these historical houses, and not whether they should be preserved or not. It was taken for granted by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer that at least a high proportion of them should be preserved. The Report recognises that these monuments are part of our historic patrimony, part of our national wealth and, incidentally, have a considerable earning power from the tourist trade. I should imagine that very few people wish to see them fall into decay. One has only to notice the popularity of some of them which have been opened to the public since 1945 for any doubts on that score to be dispelled.[112]

While Gaitskell did agree that the state needed to take positive action to preserve historic houses, he did not entertain the central suggestion of tax relief. He stated that he rejected the possibility of tax concessions to private persons outright 'for obvious reasons' in correspondence with the MOW on 3 April 1951.[113] Answering a written question on 26 April, Gaitskell dismissed relief from taxation as a means of aiding preservation, because it would amount to 'a subsidy to a special class of persons'.[114] He stated the government's intentions to set up the 'machinery' for greater state involvement in positive preservation instead, through the establishment of Historic Buildings Councils as advisory bodies (i.e. without the executive powers recommended by Gowers) to the MOW, which would absorb the Ministry of Local Government and Planning's existing powers of preservation. These Councils would have limited initial funding, he warned, due to 'the burden of defence and the existing financial situation'.[115]

The Inland Revenue had costed the potential loss of revenue from the Committee's taxation recommendations at between five and ten million pounds a year.[116] It was not the affordability of tax relief that was problematic, but—as the *Manchester Guardian* had

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[112] Hansard, HL Deb 8 March 1951, vol 170, c990. Lord Methuen had advocated for tax exemptions, and specifically tax-exempt maintenance funds, for historic house owners for many years. See: 'The Gowers report: protection and preservation of historic buildings', undated, TNA, WORK 14/2358.
Methuen had offered his own ancestral country home, Corsham Court, to the Bath Academy of Art (after the wartime destruction of their original premises) and dedicated himself to its restoration. The Academy was established there in 1946. Methuen was an artist, and previously a trustee of both the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery.
See: J. Gere, 'Methuen, Paul Ayshford, fourth Baron Methuen (1886–1974)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sep. 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37762 (20 Jan. 2020); 'Wiltshire Community History', https://history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getcom.php?id=71 (12 Oct. 2019).
[113] 'GOWERS REPORT: Historic Houses - Note by Chancellor of the Exchequer', 3 Apr. 1951, TNA, HLG 103/15.
[114] Hansard, HC Deb 26 April 1951, vol 487, c87.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Memo on The Gowers Report by Edward Playfair for Sir Edward Bridges.

suggested—the impossibility of being seen to subsidise the rich. At a time when Gaitskell was contemplating the introduction of prescription charges to support the unsustainably expensive National Health Service, the Chancellor would have been unwise to consider tax reliefs even if he had supported them in principle—which, as he continually stated, he did not.[117] Gaitskell's personal preference for country house preservation was to base any new arrangements on the NT's involvement as guardians of historic houses, continuing in the vein of his predecessors as Chancellor since 1945.[118] Edward Playfair believed that 'existing ownership will come out far cheaper than the policy, which the Financial Secretary commends, of handing over ownership (and thus full responsibility for maintenance) to a public body'.[119] Gaitskell was, however, explicit that 'for reasons of principle', he was prepared to suffer either the additional expenditure of state maintenance, or simply accepting 'some further limitation on work done'.[120] In other words, principle trumped practicality.

Gaitskell was criticised for a seemingly ungenerous attitude toward the issue, but his position closely followed those of both his predecessors as Chancellor. In a Commons debate in June 1951, Colegate, who agitated in favour of the Gowers recommendations until his death in 1959, portrayed Gaitskell's attitude to heritage as antithetical to Labour's progress on the Gowers Report's central recommendation of tax reliefs. He noted that Cripps had recently asked him to 'do as much propaganda as you can in favour of the recommendations of the Gowers Report'.[121] However, Gaitskell confirmed that Cripps had not been in favour of the Committee's taxation proposals.[122] Dalton, whose establishment of the Land Fund had in turn established him as the

[117] Prescription charges were abandoned in favour of increased dental and ophthalmic charges in 1951, and later introduced in 1952 by Churchill's Conservative government. Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, pp. 101, 116.
[118] Internal correspondence of January 1951, TNA, HLG 126/18.
[119] Memo on The Gowers Report by Edward Playfair for Sir Edward Bridges.
[120] 'The Gowers Report on Houses of Outstanding Architectural or Historic Significance', Note by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Draft, 16 Mar. 1951, TNA, HLG 103/15.
[121] Hansard, HC Deb 14 June 1951, vol 488, c2614. Arthur Colegate worked for the Fabian Society in his youth and later, following a spell in the Board of Trade and in business, joined the Conservative Party. He first served as MP for The Wrekin, Shropshire, where he was elected at the 1941 election. In 1951 he was MP for Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire. See: 'Sir A. Colegate', *Times* (12 Sep. 1956), p.11.
[122] HC Deb 14 June 1951, 488, c2623. Cripps' position was the same as Dalton's: that the NLF should be used principally for the NT. James Lees-Milne records that Cripps told Lord Esher, 'You can spend as much of the reserve [of the NLF] as you like so long as it is spent on the NT and not on the previous owners'. See: Lees-Milne, *Midway on the Waves*, p. 35 [18 Mar. 1948].

champion of the principle of preservation, had urged Gaitskell to act quickly on the issue—but only by securing a substantial endowment (from the Land Fund) for the NT. In a letter from Dalton to Gaitskell in December 1950, Dalton reiterated that he was 'definitely against' the proposal of large tax reliefs for owners of historic houses.[123]

Gaitskell's stance was supported by the Inland Revenue. In a report to the Chancellor of July 1950, Revenue staff stated that they:

> … remain of the opinion that if owners of historic houses are to be helped by the Exchequer to maintain their houses the help should be given in the form of a direct grant, and not by a side wind through the medium of the income tax.[124]

Their main objections were those that Gaitskell later expressed: tax exemptions would set a precedent and privilege a 'special class' of people. The Treasury and Inland Revenue did explore the idea of highly limited tax concessions for a few 'designated houses' in October-November 1951. However, Willis explained that the contemplation of concessions was based on the belief that the MOW would be 'given powers to <u>compel</u> owners to carry out capital works of preservation'. However, the MOW had abandoned this idea and 'where the expenditure is voluntarily incurred' the Revenue had 'no real excuse for abandoning our principle of equality between taxpayers'.[125]

The MOW had been at the vanguard of government involvement with country house preservation, including as the custodian of historic house museums. Under the 1947 Ancient Monuments Act, the MOW was empowered to buy, or receive by deed of gift, inhabited houses. The existing occupants could continue to live in the house under agreed terms, provided that there was a degree of public access. Where houses were to be accepted by the state under the National Land Fund, the MOW was anxious to maintain control. It had expanded enormously in recent years, and between 1939 and 1946 its staff rose from 6,000 to 22,000.[126] The MOW believed that they had the greater expertise and ability to make houses accessible to the public. One of the

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[123] Letter from Dalton to Gaitskell on 20 December 1950, 'Gowers Report', marked Dalton 919.115 (origin unknown; copy courtesy of Ann Scott). Dalton held Gaitskell in high esteem, and the two men had been friends since the late 1920s. See: Dalton, *High Tide and After*, p. 426.
[124] Report (M.919) quoted in letter from RW to E. W. Playfair, 2 Feb. 1951, TNA, HLG 126/18.
[125] Letter from R. Willis to F. J. Root, 2 Nov. 1951, TNA, T 218/10.
[126] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, pp. 197-8.

conclusions of a discussion in 1948 that included the MOW's Deputy Secretary, Nicolas de Villiers, and the Chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board for England, Eric de Normann, was that 'the Trust has no technical staff that know anything about the problems of the maintenance of historic buildings'.[127] For its part, the NT criticised the Gowers Report for its ambiguity concerning administration of inhabited houses after they had been acquired by the nation: it did not specify that such houses should be under the NT's control.[128] However, the MOW's concerns over the NT's expertise appeared justified by the recent case of Ham House. While the house had been donated to the NT by the Tollemache family in 1948, it came without an endowment. The NT was therefore unable to maintain the building without help from the state. The Government agreed to lease the house from the NT, under the agreement that the MOW would run it as a museum. The Tollemache family were unwilling to include furnishings in their gift to the NT, and so the state purchased the house's contents, for which the Victoria and Albert Museum became responsible.[129] The MOW was the largest and most experienced body capable of preservation of historic buildings in Britain at the time, and they therefore resented any challenge to their expertise and authority in this area. They argued against the Gowers Committee's proposal of the establishment of Historic Buildings Councils, which they claimed would only increase the multiplicity of overlapping preservation organisations and 'might be very wasteful in man power'.[130]

Despite this confidence in their own expertise in the maintenance of historic buildings, the MOW recommended a flexible system of preservation that was not necessarily centred on further state acquisition. In their submission to the Gowers Commission, they suggested that they might assume guardianship of houses that remained in the ownership of (and occupied by) private owners. Alternatively, they suggested that owners might be given access to public funds in order

[127] 'Minutes of the Lord President's Committee', 23 Jul. 1948, TNA, HLG 126/16, p. 2.
[128] 'Criticisms by National Trust', *Daily Telegraph* (28 Sep. 1950), p. 3.
[129] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 189.
[130] 'Draft Memorandum by the Ministry of Works on the report of the Committee on houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest', undated, TNA, HLG, 126/17, para. 9.

to find 'an economic use for their houses', such as through farming.[131] Previously, they had advocated for 'the French system'.[132] In France, a 'scheduled' building (i.e. a building formally designated as significant) could not be altered without the consent of the state, and ordinarily the state would contribute half the repair costs. A scheduled building could be compulsorily acquired by the state, but in practice this only happened in cases of neglect. Most importantly, an owner of a scheduled building was entitled to an allowance that equalled half of their annual expenditure on major repairs and could claim back the entirety of their annual expenditure on maintenance.[133] This was the precedent for the Committee's recommendations for a tax-free maintenance claim and was the only foreign example of state-managed preservation that they considered in detail. The Committee had not sought out the information independently, but were provided with a study of the French system from Angus Acworth, one of the founders of the Georgian Group.[134] Overall, the MOW viewed the Gowers tax proposals as 'sensible and welcome', and commented that they 'might go far to solve the problem of the historic house in private ownership'.[135]

Ultimately, the government remained resistant to tax exemptions. In line with the Inland Revenue's views, Gaitskell argued that a grant-based system enabled the government to give what they felt was feasible in any given year, whereas tax exemptions could not be controlled in response to budget restraints.[136] He announced a broad outline of the proposed bill in April 1951, stating that 'any action taken by the State should be positive in character and under full Parliamentary control'.[137] A 'very small sum' of money would be under the control of the Minister of Works, to 'make loans or grants in order to preserve the structure' of 'outstanding houses', working closely with local councils and the NT. Gaitskell further explained that the government had rejected the proposal that the Historic Buildings Councils should be granted executive powers, citing the importance of maintaining 'normal Ministerial responsibility and

[131] 'Committee on Houses of National Importance: Memorandum by the Ministry of Works', 28 Feb. 1949, TNA, T 219/177.
[132] 'Minutes of the Lord President's Committee'.
[133] Gowers, *Report*, pp. 74–77.
[134] Ibid., p. 74.
[135] 'Draft Memorandum by the Ministry of Works'.
[136] HC Deb 14 June 1951, vol 488, c2627.
[137] HC Deb 26 April 1951, vol 487, cc86-89.

Parliamentary control of expenditure'. The only planned changes to taxation related to Estate Duty. The government intended 'to make it easier for noteworthy houses and their contents to be transferred or bequeathed to the Government, the National Trusts or other public bodies' by expanding existing provisions for accepting land and houses in payment of Estate Duty to the acceptance of chattels (via the Land Fund); granting Estate Duty exemption of house contents given to the Government or public bodies; and the exemption of gifts or bequests of houses, land and accompanying endowment funds to public bodies.[138]

The Labour government's refusal to entertain the possibility of tax reliefs under any of its Chancellors did not surprise contemporaries. Moreover, their approach was not considered inconsistent with the opposition's stance on preservation of private historic houses. As the *Economist* put it in May 1951, 'To give special privileges to the rich to enable them to live in the style to which they are accustomed is out of the question for a Labour Government—and still more for a Conservative one'.[139] This particular journalist expressed disappointment that Labour's proposals were 'no more than a step in the direction indicated by the Gowers Committee', but expected no more. It was widely accepted that "privileging a special class of people" was untenable, and criticism of Labour's position on this from the opposition was limited to a few outspoken MPs.[140] The post-war Labour government had prioritised preservation, but within a framework of increasing public ownership of land. There was no place for tax relief within this framework. In his Leader's Speech at the Party Conference of 1951, Attlee stated, 'You have had a Government that has not only looked at the countryside as a means of producing food, but as part of our great national heritage of beauty'.[141] The Conservative government's position on land

[138] Ibid.
[139] 'Stately Homes', *Economist* (5 May 1951), p.1030.
[140] On proposing, among other measures, the suspension of death duties on historic houses for as long as they remain unsold, Arthur Colegate MP commented that, 'Today the Philistine is rampant in many fields, and if there is one field in which at comparatively little cost the British Government can save so vast a heritage of beauty, surely nothing should stand in the way of their taking the necessary steps and introducing the necessary legislation', See: HC Deb 14 June 1951, vol 488, c2619.
[141] 'Leader's speech, Scarborough 1951', http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=161 (4 Dec. 2019).

nationalisation starkly opposed Labour's, and yet—ultimately—their position towards private country house owners was remarkably consistent with that of their predecessors.

Although the Conservative government that gained power in October 1951 planned to follow Labour's intentions for new heritage legislation, they also sought to underplay their agreement with the previous administration. It appears that this was part of a wider desire to avoid giving the appearance of political consensus. When asked in October 1952 why the government had stalled for so long on historic building preservation, rather than following through with the previous government's draft legislation, the new Chancellor, Rab Butler, dismissed the question with the retort that, 'Our main desire is to avoid following the example of the previous Government in every respect'. This prompted Gaitskell to request that Butler 'refrain from introducing party considerations into this matter'.[142]

The delay in legislation was not caused by political prevarication alone, but by the Treasury's decision to put a national heritage bill into 'cold storage' in October 1951. They had planned to go ahead with the bill almost as the Labour government had prepared it, but decided that legislation was neither urgent nor wise before the report of the Anderson (or Waverley) Committee on the Export of Works of Art, which was published in October 1952.[143] There was no further attempt to push the agenda of tax exemptions from its firmest advocate in the Treasury, Edward Playfair, who explained to Ernest Gowers in late October 1951 that,

> To restore your ideas would be one more hot potato in a season of hot potatoes; and I have been struck by the fact that the critics of your tax ideas are not to be defined by Party. A lot of Tories felt the same way that the Labour Government did.[144]

This was evident when Arthur Colegate MP pressed his belief in the necessity for tax exemptions for historic house owners again in August 1952, but this time to ministers in his own party. He was met with resistance akin to that shown by Gaitskell a year earlier. John Boyd-Carpenter, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, stated that the government was 'looking afresh' at the

[142] Hansard, HC Deb 14 October 1952, vol 505, cc22–24.
[143] Letter from Playfair to D. Johnstone (Treasury), 25 Oct. 1951, TNA, T 218/10.
[144] Letter from Playfair to Gowers, 31 Oct. 1951, TNA, T 218/10.

recommendations of the Gowers Committee, but repeated the Treasury's and Inland Revenue's consistent position against exemptions:

> … in general, it would cut right across the accepted canons of taxation if special tax adjustments were to be made in favour of individuals by reason of the fact that they happened to be the proprietors or inhabitants of beautiful or ancient houses.[145]

The strong opposition to special tax provisions from the Treasury and Inland Revenue would prove to be a formidable obstacle to implementation of the exemptions proposed by Gowers for decades to come.

This was the political climate into which the long-anticipated report of the Waverley Committee on the Export of Works of Art emerged on 29 October 1952. Vivian F. Wang has described how the Waverley Report was precipitated by a belief among art professionals that the flow of important artworks and objects abroad had reached a crisis point.[146] The Committee recommended that the state should retain the right to prevent the export of works of art that had been deemed significant by a reviewing committee, but that the owner should be guaranteed a purchase offer at a 'fair price'.[147] The government quickly accepted all the Committee's recommendations (with two minor exceptions) and appointed a Reviewing Committee for the Export of Works of Art in December 1952.[148]

The swift acceptance of the Waverley Report recommendations is partly explained by their relatively low cost to the state, in contrast to the costly recommendations for tax relief made in the Gowers Report. The administration of export bans and the establishment of a seven-person committee were the main expenses of the new system. Under the Waverley system, the state was under no obligation to purchase items that had been temporarily export-stopped, but was able to

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[145] Hansard, HC Deb 6 February 1953, vol 510, c2225

[146] V. F. Wang, 'Whose Responsibility? The Waverley System, Past and Present', *International Journal of Cultural Property,* 15/3 (2008), p. 229.

[147] HMSO, *The Export of Works of Art Etc.: Report of a Committee Appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer* (London, 1952) [i.e. Waverley Report], p. 24, para. 125; 'Export of Art Treasures', *Times* (29 Oct. 1952), p. 3.

[148] These exceptions were the Committee's recommendations for the treatment of archives, because the government had appointed a committee to consider the conservation of archives that was yet to report; and the suggested limit of £1,000, below which the Committee proposed that export licences should not be refused on grounds of national importance. The government felt that this figure could be too low. See: Hansard, HC Deb 9 December 1952, vol 509, cc37-38.

pause the sale of an item to a foreign buyer for several months to provide UK institutions and private individuals with a chance to raise the money to purchase the item.[149] The measures therefore had little immediate effect on country house owners, beyond the new possibility that the sale of an art object could be stalled for months and thus delay the receipt of money that would go towards the upkeep and repair of a house.

As explained above, the Treasury had decided to postpone legislation affecting historic houses until the publication of the Waverley Report. Accordingly, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG), newly formed from the Ministry of Town and Country Planning (following its assumption of significant relevant functions from the Ministry of Health), was still in the early stages of preparing a bill for the preservation of historic buildings in October 1952. Harold Macmillan was the MHLG Minister, charged with the challenging task of building 300,000 houses a year at a time of building supplies shortages, and he—like the civil servants in his ministry—was convinced that direct grants were a more desirable method of historic building preservation than tax exemptions.[150] In October, he wrote that he had 'no doubt … that the payment of grants in appropriate cases is the most economical and flexible way of giving assistance', because tax exemptions would result in 'those really impoverished owners who are paying least taxation' receiving the least benefit.[151] This view was shared by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, John Boyd-Carpenter, who said that 'the benefit derived from the remission of taxation would necessarily be greatest in the case of wealthy owners and least in the case of the impoverished'.[152] Like ministers of the preceding government, Macmillan favoured 'working through the National Trust so far as possible in the case of inhabited houses'.[153] The central tenet of the Gowers recommendations, that the best and most economical way to preserve

[149] Waverley Report, p. 24.
[150] Macmillan's responsibilities as MHLG Minister are discussed in H. C. G. Matthew, 'Macmillan, (Maurice) Harold, first earl of Stockton (1894–1986), prime minister', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Jun. 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/40185 (12 Mar. 2020).
[151] 'Preparation of the bill, H. A.(52) 128: Cabinet: Home Affairs Committee: Preservation of Historic Buildings: Memorandum by the Minister of Works, 2nd October 1952', TNA, WORK 14/2216.
[152] 'H.A.(52) 27th Meeting: Thursday, 16th October, 1952', TNA, T 218/11.
[153] Ibid.

country houses was for the state to support private ownership, had not been embraced by Churchill's government any more than it had been by Attlee's.

The bill that the Conservative ministry was preparing in late 1952 was therefore grounded in the understanding that grants would be provided instead of tax relief. The focus of debate surrounding the new bill shifted onto the question of whether a new body would be created to distribute these grants, and under whose authority it would be placed. Evelyn Sharp (Deputy Secretary of the MHLG) strongly objected to the suggestion that powers over the maintenance of historic buildings might be transferred from the MHLG to the MOW.[154] Hugh Molson (Parliamentary Secretary of the MOW) informed David Eccles (Minister of Works) that it was essential that they bypass Sharp and ensure that Macmillan (MHLG minister) agreed to cede these powers. Molson '[could not] believe that Harold Macmillan [would] show himself such a glutton for power that, in addition to all his multifarious responsibilities and activities, he should desire to maintain his new fangled and ineffectual control over historic houses'.[155]

The MOW did not, however, intend to take on full administrative responsibility over the new system. Rather, despite their objections in 1948, they favoured the NT's heavy involvement. This change of opinion appears to have been driven by the new Conservative ministers in the MOW. David Eccles recommended that the government only attempt to 'hand down to future generations a relatively small number of houses which would represent the development of British domestic architecture at its best'. He suggested should be achieved via grants administered by the NT, if the allocated money was too little to justify either a separate body or the MOW managing it.[156] Hugh Molson agreed. Molson was part of a social set that celebrated and defended the country house; growing up, he had been a close friend of Evelyn Waugh and frequent visitor at the Waughs' Hampstead house.[157] He pushed for early legislation, to be introduced quietly in the

[154] Letter from Hugh Molson to David Eccles, 11 Aug. 1952, TNA, WORK 14/2359.
[155] Ibid.
[156] 'Cabinet: Home Affairs Committee: Extract from Minutes of a Meeting held on Tuesday, 7th October, 1952', TNA, WORK 14/2216; 'Note of a meeting on Monday, 18th August 1952: Historic Houses', TNA, WORK 14/2216.
[157] P. Morton, '"The Funniest Book in the World": Waugh and The Diary of a Nobody', *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies*, 36/1 (2005).

House of Lords. This would draw less attention to the government's adoption of proposals that were fundamentally the same as those pursued by Labour, as he explained:

> Although their proposals were too Socialist for my liking, it is important for us to realise that they did intend to devote public money to preserving our great heritage of domestic architecture. The Conservative Party is presumably not less anxious to preserve our architectural heritage, and the more we can with a clear conscience adopt their proposals, the better.[158]

The government decided against giving the NT decision-making responsibilities, but the MOW worked closely with the NT in the design of what would become the new advisory councils. Jack Rathbone, NT Secretary, pressed for the new body to be called the Historic Buildings Council, telling the MOW that it was important the council 'would be of such calibre as to command respect in the outside world'.[159]

A new system: The Historic Buildings Councils

The Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act became law on 31 July 1953. Three Historic Buildings Councils—for England, Scotland and Wales—were appointed in October 1953 to advise the Minister of Works, and these became the basis for a system of grant-giving for built heritage preservation that would continue for decades. In 1996, Mandler commented that the Act 'remains the foundation of State preservation today'.[160] Despite this, the Act was viewed as something of a failure within government. Edward Playfair described the bill as a 'gloomy compromise', blaming David Eccles for having 'kicked so hard against the scheme'.[161]

The Historic Buildings Councils (HBCs) began with an annual collective budget of £250,000, and some saw this as poor recompense for three years of apparent deliberation.[162] At

[158] 'Letter for Minister drafted by Parly Secy (18. 7. 52)', TNA, WORK 14/2359.
[159] 'Note of a meeting held in Mr Root's room at 3. P.M. on Monday, 10th November 1952 to discuss co-operation with the National Trust', TNA, WORK 14/2216.
[160] Mandler, *Preserving the Past*, p. 106.
[161] 'C.(52) 342: Preservation of Historic Buildings', 20 Oct. 1952, TNA, T 218/11.
[162] Hansard, HL Deb 27 July 1953, vol 183, c909.

the NT's AGM in 1953, Lord Crawford said that 'the expenditure authorized would not go far in solving an immense and difficult problem', and 'the battle continues as formidably as before'.[163] Not only was Crawford Chairman of the NT, but he was a trustee and chairman for a wide range of museums and galleries, and therefore better placed than most to understand the financial difficulties of maintaining historic houses.[164] Criticism also came from the pages of *Country Life*, where reader Russell Steele of Gloucester Gate, NW1, complained that the 'paltry' sum allocated to the upkeep of historic houses was 'almost cruel after the considerate and moderate recommendations of the Gowers Report'. He argued that there was an urgent need to reduce death duties, which was only fair given that the 'so-called lower income groups have received benefits', and it was 'time for the middle and upper income groups to have a square deal'.[165] The lack of taxation benefits for historic houses owners was clearly not what Steele, and many of his middle-class peers, expected from the new Conservative government. Eccles publicly acknowledged the inadequacy of the 1953 Act, telling the House of Commons that it was presented 'in the belief that half a loaf is better than no bread'.[166] The HBCs were a compromise; maintaining government control over grants that would facilitate private ownership, without being seen to otherwise support private ownership substantially through tax exemptions.

Nevertheless, members of the HBC for England ensured that funding country houses remained at the top of the agenda for several decades. The membership of this Council was particularly significant, since the HBCs for Scotland and (especially) Wales were side-lined from the outset. As Mandler has noted, the English Council had most of the money and nearly all of the 'country house work', reflecting the division of power and interest of the elites between countries.[167] Initially, the Chairman of the Welsh HBC received £250 as annual remuneration for

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[163] 'Preserving Historic Houses: Lord Crawford's Warning', *Times* (13 Nov. 1953), p. 4.
[164] These included the National Gallery, British Museum, Tate Gallery, National Galleries for Scotland, National Art Collections Fund, the Royal Fine Arts Commission, and the Pilgrim Trust. He had also been part of the Waverley Committee on the export of works of art (1950), and therefore had a thorough understanding of how the sale or destruction of privately-owned historic houses would affect Britain's galleries and museums. See: A. Bell, 'Lindsay, David Alexander Robert, twenty-eighth earl of Crawford and eleventh earl of Balcarres (1900–1975)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sept. 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31362 (4 Dec. 2019).
[165] 'Historic Houses and Taxation', *Country Life*, 2929/113 (6 Mar. 1953), p. 663.
[166] Hansard, HC Deb 3 July 1953, vol 517, c753.
[167] Mandler, 'Nationalising the Country House', p.106.

their time; the Scottish Chairman received £500; and the English Chairman received £1,500. The MHLG reasoned that these figures reflected the relative burden of the jobs, but did not wait for grant applications to come in before fixing the relative workloads.[168]

The English HBC was therefore given greatest priority and influence in decision making. Its original members represented a socially elite and limited circle.[169] Delafons has described them as 'a suitable team of grandees and scholars'.[170] The Council was chaired by Sir Alan Lascelles for its first twenty years, as its inception coincided with Lascelles' retirement from service as Queen Elizabeth II's private secretary. Lascelles also took over chairmanship of the Pilgrim Trust, a grant-making charity focused on preservation that had emphasised the importance of family ownership of historic houses in its evidence to the Gowers Committee. Lascelles' social and professional connections to many of Britain's country estate owners was seen by the MHLG as a great advantage in the role; in discussion of the appointment, they described him as 'above reproach and fitted to deal with owners'.[171]

John Summerson was one of the English HBC's original members, and he later reflected that it was a decidedly "upper class" mix of men from Eton, Harrow, Charterhouse, Winchester, and Marlborough. 'Looking back,' he wrote, 'I do not think the class factor had the slightest significance'.[172] These upper-class members included Hugh Fitzroy, the Earl of Euston (known as the Duke of Grafton after 1970), who had spent several years in the army following his education at Eton College and Cambridge. When appointed to the HBC, Fitzroy was serving as vice-chairman of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.[173] He served alongside Sir James Mann, Director of the Wallace Collection in 1953, who had been educated at Winchester

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[168] 'Historic Buildings Act, 1953', letter from H. Kendrew (MHLG) to D. Johnstone (Treasury), 7 Aug. 1953, TNA, HLG 126/104.
[169] Listed in *Parl Pap.* (1953/54), 15 (169), Historic Buildings Council for England, First Annual Report, 1953, p. 2.
[170] Delafons, *Politics and Preservation*, p. 73.
In 1953, John Delafons was an assistant principal to the MHLG, under Harold Macmillan (its then Minister). See: 'Lives in Brief', *Times* (26 Jul. 2007), p. 57.
[171] 'Appointment of HBC Chairman', undated, TNA, HLG 126/104.
[172] Draft of John Summerson's autobiography, unpublished, MS 377, St John's College Library, Oxford, chapter XI, p. 18.
[173] G. Darley, 'FitzRoy, Hugh Denis Charles, eleventh duke of Grafton (1919–2011), architectural conservationist and landowner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Jan. 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/103610 (25 Nov. 2019).

College and previously held posts in the Ashmolean Museum and Courtauld Institute. Mann had experience of the existing grants for public acquisition of art objects, having successfully approached the National Art Collections Fund and Pilgrim Trust to purchase armouries (his specialism) in recent years.[174] Two council members were historic house owners with aristocratic links, but limited experience of the preservation and museums world. William Fletcher-Vane, Conservative MP for Westmorland, was educated at Charterhouse and Cambridge University.[175] His family seat was Hutton in the Forest, in Cumberland. The Countess of Radnor, whose husband the Earl of Radnor owned Longford Castle, was selected personally by David Eccles, ostensibly for her involvement with local charitable causes in Wilshire; she was President of the Wiltshire Association of Youth Clubs.[176] The architectural experts of the Committee were not aristocratic, but were scarcely less upper class: Christopher Hussey—with his Eton education and family seat of Scotney Castle in Kent—and John Summerson, who attended Harrow.[177]

Three of the ten Council members had not attended an English private school. Sir William Holford, a central figure in the Ministry of Town and Country Planning (established 1943), had been educated in South Africa before taking his degree at the Liverpool University School of Architecture. Labour MP James Chuter Ede, a grandee of the Party who had been Home Secretary under Attlee, already seventy-one years old upon appointment, was the son of a shopkeeper.[178] Dorothy Mary Elliott, a prominent trade unionist, was the only other woman on the Council

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[174] A. V. B. Norman and P. Hughes, 'Mann, Sir James Gow (1897–1962), museum director', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sept. 2004) https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34853 (25 Nov. 2019).
[175] 'Inglewood, 1st Baron, (William Morgan Fletcher-Vane)', *Who's Who & Who was Who* (Oxford, Dec. 2007), https://doi.org/10.1093/ww/9780199540884.013.U165665 (25 Nov. 2019).
[176] Letter to M. R. Bruce (Treasury) from H. Kendrew (MOW), 7 Dec. 1953, TNA, HLG 126/104; 'Youth Clubs' Rally', *Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser* (29 May 1954), p. 5.
[177] J. Cornforth, 'Hussey, Christopher Edward Clive (1899–1970), architectural historian', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sept. 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34070 (25 Nov. 2019);
M. Girouard, 'Summerson, Sir John Newenham (1904–1992), museum curator and architectural historian', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, May 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47466 (25 Jul. 2019).
[178] M. Miller, 'Holford, William Graham, Baron Holford (1907–1975), architect and town planner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sept. 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31245 (25 Nov. 2029); K. Jefferys, 'Ede, James Chuter Chuter-, Baron Chuter-Ede (1882–1965), politician and educationist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Jan. 2008) https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32414 (5 Dec. 2019).

besides the Countess of Radnor.[179] Her appointment was not necessarily an attempt to bring diversity of political opinion to the membership. Internal MOW memos discussing membership appointments show that Harold Emmerson, permanent secretary of the MOW, proposed Elliott as a member 'so as to secure representation of the point of view of sections of the general public who have an interest in visits to historic houses'.[180] Elliott was therefore appointed in her capacity as a middle-class woman rather than as a representative of the Trade Union movement, within which she had extensive experience.

Summerson may not have believed that the 'class factor' affected the Council, but a large proportion of grants went to privately owned houses under Lascelles' Chairmanship. The Duke of Sutherland made a thinly-veiled attempt to highlight the continuing financial difficulties of private owners when he questioned the suitability of the Committee members in the Lords in 1956.[181] Sutherland asked 'whether the chairman and other members have any experience or knowledge regarding houses of historic and architectural interest', but went on to praise the expertise of Council member Christopher Hussey, and state that he had 'no doubt that there are many others' on the Council whose expertise was comparable. Writing to Hussey privately, Lascelles had complained of 'that silly fellow Sutherland' raising the question:

> The Minister, & others, are, faint-heartedly in my view, trying to choke him off. Personally, I shld welcome such publicity—what better proof of our honesty could there be than the fact that we wo'nt [sic] give the dole to wealthy dukes?[182]

However, the question was used as an opportunity to press the government for further funding—not to question the validity of previous allocations—and was wholly focused on funding the 'famous castles and old manor houses' of England and Scotland.[183] This was the closest that the

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[179] Elliott was a member of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. See: Description of 'Papers of Dorothy Mary Elliott, 1914-1969', Women's Library Archives, GB 106 7DEL, Archives Hub, https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb106-7del (29 Mar. 2021).
[180] Memo from H. C. Emmerson [recipient obscured], 30 Jul. 1953, TNA, HLG 126/104.
[181] HL Deb 5 July 1956, vol 198, cc546–7.
[182] Letter from Lascelles to Christopher Hussey, 3 May 1956, Scotney Castle, 2/2/6/1.
Lascelles referred to George Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, 5th Duke of Sutherland, a Conservative politician who had been born at Cliveden House, Buckinghamshire. See: G. H. White (ed), *The Complete Peerage*, Volume XII (London, 1953), p. 568.
[183] HL Deb 5 July 1956, vol 198, cc546-57.

members of the HBC came to being questioned on their suitability for the role, and bias towards aristocrats, in Parliament.

The English HBC *did* recommend grants to wealthy dukes consistently; the obstacle to further funding for the aristocracy's houses was the HBCs' limited funds rather than their attitudes. When highlighting their concern over a lack of available funds in their annual reports, the HBCs typically highlighted privately owned historic houses as particularly at risk. In 1956, fifty-six per cent of the English Council's funding was spent on country houses, with most of the remaining forty-four per cent going to townhouses, religious houses, and agricultural or municipal buildings.[184] As Delafons has highlighted, the first several annual reports always included a section on the shortage of domestic staff for large houses, reflecting the Council's preoccupation with the problems of the country house owner.[185] Grants were typically awarded on the basis that the Council would provide half the anticipated repair costs, requiring owners to find the remaining half. The Council complained that estimating repair costs was a difficult business, because the extent of damage was often unclear until work began, and they found that life tenants of buildings vested in trusts struggled to convince trustees to release the capital necessary for repairs.[186] Given these obstacles, many owners were wary of the HBCs in their early years, and—as Cornforth has highlighted—personal connections to HBC members were key in alleviating owners' fears.[187] The Duke of Grafton's approachability, via his work for the NT and the Society of Ancient Buildings, resulted in personal requests to him for help that subsequently developed into grant requests.[188] It was aristocratic owners who were most likely to come into contact with Grafton through his activities within the arts, and therefore most encouraged to apply for financial assistance. *Country Life* magazine contributed to the attitude that HBC grants were primarily for historic house owners, through articles illustrating the repairs that grants enabled.[189]

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[184] *Parl Pap.* (1957), 14 (177), Historic Buildings Council for England, Fourth Annual Report, 1956, Appendix B.
[185] Delafons, *Politics and Preservation*, p. 74.
[186] *Parl Pap.* (1956), 21 (272), Historic Buildings Council for England, Third Annual Report, pp. 4-5.
[187] J. Cornforth, *The Country Houses of England* (London, 1998), p. 54.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.

James Chuter Ede was a lone voice on the Council when, in a Commons debate on the HBC's funding in 1961, he expressed a wish that,

> we could find a few more houses that describe a humbler life than that which was lived in the large houses which account for so much of our expenditure. I am certain that the smaller houses represented the happier lives, the more useful lives, and a better history of the English people.

However, he shared his fellow HBC members' view that it was crucial to maintain country houses, and demonstrated sympathy for owners' difficulties in adhering to strict opening requirements after receiving grants.[190] Speaking about Castle Howard, which had recently received a grant to repair the estate's mausoleum, temple and statues in the park (i.e. 'external' buildings), Chuter Ede remarked, 'I am certain it ought never to have been built, but having been built I am quite certain that it must be maintained'.[191] The only Labour MP on the English Council was therefore supportive of the HBC's extensive expenditure on privately owned country houses, despite his hopes that the Council might also spend more elsewhere.

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After 1953, the ambitious proposals for the preservation of privately owned country houses put forward by the Gowers Committee in 1950 were abandoned. The implementation of HBCs was a compromise with which neither Labour nor the Conservatives were wholly satisfied. However, their establishment was a clear demonstration that the issue of historic house preservation was now considered to be firmly within the government's responsibilities, and not only in relation to restricting private individuals' rights to destroy their own property, but including positive (i.e. preventative) preservation. Politicians continually demonstrated support for the Gowers Report's statement that country houses represented an irreplaceable 'association of beauty, of art and of nature' that was unique to Britain, although few favoured extensive tax relief for private owners.

[190] Hansard, HC Deb 14 February 1961, vol 634, cc 1354–7.
[191] Ibid., c1356.

The outcome of the 1953 Historic Buildings Act was therefore a mixed blessing for owners. The grants dispensed by the HBCs were viewed as the minimum aid that future governments might offer private historic house owners, and their provision was politically non-controversial. The lengthy negotiations over Gowers' suggestions, which so frustrated the Treasury in particular, set a precedent for future in-depth consideration of further concessions. It would, however, require extraordinary political intent for the issue to be revisited by a future government; this did not occur until the 1970s. Meanwhile, owners were required to innovate financially in order to maintain their houses. As detailed in the following chapter, it was owners' initiative over the following two decades that would eventually return the question of further concessions to the political agenda.

Chapter Two

Country House Tourism and the Birth of a Lobby Group, 1953–72

Between the formation of the Historic Buildings Councils in 1953 and the early 1970s, political agitation related to privately owned country houses was centred on tourism. Spearheaded by a few prominent house owners, the growth of country house tourism ensured the temporary transformation of the country house into the 'stately home': the accessible national monument that could be presented as a public asset rather than a vestige of a dying class. However, this was a double-edged sword: the limited group of owners who shaped the new image of the 'stately home' set wider public expectations that historic houses *ought* to open their doors to visitors. Buoyed by the post-war recovery in the value of both land and art objects, a growing number of house owners were able to stay afloat financially by running their houses as tourist attractions and making use of the tax concessions and grants for which they were consequently eligible. In doing so, they set a new precedent for house owners: they were able to help themselves, and only expect government help when attempting to make their houses profitable businesses. Tourism-focused owners joined forces under the aegis of the British Travel Association to secure better conditions for public opening. In this capacity, they began to lobby for better tax conditions for country houses and their estates from the late 1960s.

From the early 1960s, economic growth was at the top of the political agenda. Harold Wilson, who would lead the Labour Party to election victory in 1964, believed that the standing of a government depended on the success of its economic policy.[1] While the protection of historic buildings had been a priority for Attlee's ministry, and particularly for Chancellor Hugh Dalton, it was not a priority for subsequent governments. The 1953 Historic Buildings Act, enacted under Churchill, ensured that further legislation would not be considered for a long time. Under the subsequent Conservative governments led by Eden and Macmillan, concessions for historic

[1] N. T. Gavin and D. Sanders, 'The Economy and Voting', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 50/4 (1997), p. 631; G. O'Hara, *From Dreams to Disillusionment: Economic and Social Planning in 1960s Britain* (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 12.

buildings were not on the political agenda; if anything, owners feared further taxes. Unbeknownst to country house owners, the Conservative Party did consider a wealth tax when in opposition in the mid-1960s.

This chapter will outline the gradual development of a British 'stately home industry' in the 1950s and 1960s, and the corresponding political organisation of country house owners under the British Travel Association, which became the British Tourist Authority in 1970. Peter Mandler provides greater detail on the entrepreneurial activities of owners in these years in *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (1997), as does Adrian Tinniswood in *Noble Ambitions: The Fall and Rise of the Post-War Country House* (2021).[2] The subject is also covered in David Littlejohn's *The Fate of the English Country House* (1997).[3] In discussing the development of country house tourism, this chapter is distinguished from the existing literature by a focus on the relationship between house owners' commercial activities and the political representation of country houses. It further develops this topic through discussion of how country house owners navigated the fiscal arrangements of this era, including the indivisibility of financial concessions and public access, both individually and collectively. This provides a more systematic analysis of the fiscal aspects of country house opening than that offered by the existing literature.

The development of a stately home industry

As the Gowers Committee were putting together their report, an entirely new section of the domestic tourist industry was in development. Country houses had been open in various guises for centuries, and a few—most notably, Chatsworth—were open to paying visitors regularly before 1950. However, the second half of the century saw enormous expansion in the number of country houses that opened their doors to visitors for a fee. According to Mandler, 120 houses

[2] P. Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (London, 1997); A. Tinniswood, *Noble Ambitions: The Fall and Rise of the Post-War Country House* (London, 2021).
[3] D. Littlejohn, *The Fate of the English Country House* (Oxford, 1997).

were open in 1951. Many of these were National Trust (NT) properties; the NT opened over thirty country houses to the public in 1950 alone.[4] The houses entering this market had a captive audience: petrol rationing ended in 1950, and the near impossibility of foreign travel for the majority of the population meant that stately homes comprised a large proportion of the few leisure destinations available.[5] In 1968, Lord Montagu informed the House of Lords that 883 houses and castles were open to the public, 304 of which were privately owned: the vast majority of those properties had opened since 1950.[6] More and more private owners were opening to the public in order to take advantage of what was now an established market.

Guides to opening a stately home that were published in this period, including the Duke of Bedford's (1959) and Lord Montagu's (1967), demonstrate the rapidity of change in this area. Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu (3rd Baron Montagu of Beaulieu) and Ian Russell (13th Duke of Bedford) belonged to the group of "pioneering" historic house owners who opened to the public in the early 1950s: the Marquess of Bath at Longleat in 1949; Montagu at Beaulieu in 1952; and Bedford at Woburn in 1954. Bedford and Montagu described the tribulations of opening their houses for the first time, and the long struggle to break even. Woburn had 181,000 visitors in the first year; among privately owned houses, only Chatsworth achieved greater footfall. However, Bedford's gross income of £80,000 from visitors' fees in 1958 did not even cover expenditure.[7] Feeling the need to introduce new attractions in order to attract more visitors, Bedford gradually built up a safari park at Woburn from the mid-1960s.[8] Similarly, Montagu explored various options to make his house economically viable when he inherited the Beaulieu estate, including converting Palace House into a hotel. His first major decision was to sell off land on the periphery of the estate.[9] Knowing that the house alone would not attract an adequate number of visitors,

[4] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 371.
[5] In the early 1950s, under the Attlee government, there was a £30 limit on the foreign currency that a traveller may take on each trip abroad. See: K. Morgan*, Britain since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford, 1990; repr. Oxford, 2001), p. 77; 93.
[6] Hansard, HL Deb 15 May 1968, vol 292, cc125–26.
[7] John R. R. Bedford, *A Silver-Plated Spoon* (London, 1959), p. 214; 226.
[8] 'Woburn zebra answer to Longleat lions', *Daily Telegraph* (9 Jul. 1966), p. 9; 'Game but not tame: Dennis Barker reports from the lions' den at Woburn', *Guardian* (27 Aug. 1970), p. 11.
[9] Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, *The Gilt and the Gingerbread, or how to live in a Stately Home and make money* (London, 1967), pp. 47–48.

Montagu took inspiration from his father John Douglas-Scott-Montagu's association with early motoring and arranged and publicised a display of classic cars in front of the house.[10] This later developed into the National Motor Museum. At Longleat, which is often considered the first lived-in country house to be opened as a fully "commercial" tourist attraction, the Marquess of Bath partnered with Jimmy Chipperfield (who was known for his expansion of his family's circus business) and introduced lions to the estate in 1966. This was controversial, but generated a huge rise in attendance.[11] If an owner intended to maintain their house from visitor income, they needed to invest both time and money into creating the amenities and attractions that would ensure a steady flow of visitors. As Bedford and the comedic writer George Mikes put it in the entertaining *How to Run a Stately Home* (1971), a stately house would 'come in handy', but 'stately loos, good teas, and plenty of parking space … are indispensable'.[12]

Despite the increasing popularity of stately homes, opening was not a profitable business. Visitor income was unlikely to offset costs, and many owners turned to large-scale events as a means of generating profit. Beaulieu hosted jazz festivals from 1956 to 1961, and Longleat hosted some of the most popular rock and pop artists in 1964.[13] Country houses increasingly welcomed Hollywood crews to their estates, and Belvoir Castle, Eastnor Castle, and Castle Howard—to name only a few—became the backdrops of 1960s cinema. These methods of money-making were rarely sustainable; the festivals at Beaulieu and Longleat were stopped when they became unmanageable, and income from film and television companies was unpredictable. Owners without a substantial income that was independent of their estate had to adapt and innovate continually in order to remain afloat.

Mandler identifies the mid-1950s as the point at which the 'stately home business' became an established part of leisure and culture, aligning its rise with the rehabilitation of the

[10] John Douglas-Scott-Montagu is frequently described as a 'pioneer of motoring'.
[11] Montagu, *The Gilt and the Gingerbread*, p. 104.
[12] John R. R. Bedford and George Mikes, *How to Run a Stately Home* (London, 1971), p. 15.
[13] Montagu, *The Gilt and the Gingerbread*, pp. 71-73; BBC News Wiltshire Archives, 'Longleat Pop' (13 Nov. 2014), http://www.bbc.co.uk/wiltshire/content/articles/2009/01/26/longleat_pop_festivals_60s_feature.shtml (20 Apr. 2021).

aristocracy.[14] By the 1960s, he claims, the 'old prejudices against the aristocratic lifestyle' had been largely erased.[15] On some level, they had. In an article about the success of the stately home industry in 1957, the *Manchester Guardian* felt able to claim that the landed economy 'now largely depends on the fact that nearly everybody loves a lordly home, which by being opened is in some measure converted into a public asset'. The journalist reported that over a dozen dukes and some 150 of the 'lesser aristocracy' now opened their houses to the public.[16] The shift in terminology from 'country house' to 'stately home' was telling; Cannadine considers it a 'major transformation' in the status of the houses, as a 'country house, sequestered and secluded, was one thing; a stately home, open to a paying public, was quite another'.[17] Crucially, this was not a total transformation of the entire category of country houses; not all 'country houses' became 'stately homes', although the terms were often used interchangeably. Rather, the transformation that occurred after 1950 was a division between commercially run houses and those that remained closed to the public. The latter category still far outnumbered the former, although open houses dominated the public's idea of what an historic house looked like in the twentieth century.

In parallel, a division developed between commercially minded aristocrats and more financially secure country house owners, who often saw attempts to make properties more attractive to tourists as crude showmanship. Mandler has described owners' concerns that their 'showman peers' were 'abandoning what was distinctive about the aristocracy'.[18] Montagu addressed this directly in his 1967 book, writing that 'If at times we appear over mercenary, too publicity-conscious, even shameless, then this is being forced upon us'. Stately home owners must 'move with the times and act together before it is too late', he wrote, and 'remove the great prejudice against apparent wealth both at public and private level'.[19] While 'showman peers' were atypical, they demonstrated that making country houses accessible to the public—not only by

[14] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 371.
[15] P. Mandler, 'Nationalising the Country House', in Michael Hunter (ed), *Preserving the Past: The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain* (Stroud, 1996), p. 110.
[16] 'Visiting Stately Homes: I - Revenue and Tax Relief', *Manchester Guardian* (6 Sep. 1957), p. 8.
[17] D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, rev. 2nd edn (London, 1992), p. 647.
[18] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 398.
[19] Montagu, *The Gilt and the Gingerbread*, pp. 240-241.

merely opening the doors, but by providing additional facilities and entertainment—was possible. They set new expectations for the role of country houses in post-war British society; some country houses had been open to visitors for a long time, but they had never been presented as attractions that offered something for the whole family. In putting enjoyment and convenience at the centre of the visitor experiences that they created, Montagu, Bath and Bedford presented a model for country house survival that many other aristocratic owners would rather did not exist. Becoming accessible meant sacrificing privacy; if all owners followed the touristic route, an aristocrat's home may no longer be his castle.

Despite criticism from their peers, the 'showman peers' were determined to maintain their aristocratic status. For Montagu, opening up country houses was a way to rehabilitate the image of the aristocracy. Opening Beaulieu's Palace House was a public duty that justified his position as both an aristocrat and an owner of an historically significant house. Taking a prominent role in the promotion of open country houses may also have been a way to rehabilitate his own image, as he had gained notoriety in 1954 when he was imprisoned for 'homosexual offences' alongside Peter Wildeblood and Michael Pitt-Rivers.[20] Some of the distaste for his 'showmanship' that Montagu perceived among his peers could have been motivated by homophobia, but it is interesting that the repercussions of the trial did not prevent Montagu from becoming the first President of the Historic Houses Association in 1973.

Montagu greatly valued his position in the House of Lords and, while he believed that his privilege entailed responsibility, his writings do not indicate that he ever doubted his claim to his seat. In 1967, Montagu stated his belief that the aristocracy had no right to assume that the state owed them a living. He was anxious that historic houses should not be a 'further burden to the State'.[21] For him, accepting state grants and tax subsidies in order to retain his position as the primary financial supporter of the estate was the best way to avoid being such a burden (based on

[20] Analysis of the trial features in H. Smith, 'Working-Class Ideas and Experiences of Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Britain: Regionalism as a Category of Analysis', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29/1 (2018), pp. 58–78; J. Bengry, 'Profit (f)or the Public Good? Sensationalism, homosexuality, and the postwar popular press', *Media History*, 20/2, pp. 146–66.
[21] Ibid., p. 11.

the belief that Beaulieu must be maintained one way or another). Bedford held similar views. In his autobiography, *A Silver-Plated Spoon* (1959), he explained that, to him, 'the whole future of the family, and indeed its right to exist in the second half of the twentieth century, was bound up with the reopening of Woburn'.[22]

In contrast to Bedford's and Montagu's position, many owners were unwilling to frame their houses as national assets, believing that this change in status would endanger future control of their family's estate. Mandler has outlined the extent of opposition to tax exemptions among historic house owners who feared that such exemptions would undermine their claims to personal ownership.[23] As Lord Bath put it in 1952, 'If, by our own initiative and enterprise, we are unable to maintain our houses during our lifetime … then as a class we have no right to exist'. For Attlee's government, an element of public ownership was the minimum requirement for public funding. Yet for Bath, it was 'imperative that nothing is done or appears to be done which may lead the public to think that these houses have ceased to be the absolute property of the owners'.[24] This did not prevent him from later accepting a grant to cover half the cost of countering death watch beetle at Longleat, although he continued to maintain that all public subsidies ought to be abolished.[25]

Many of the owners who opened to the public during the 1950s and 1960s were compelled to do so because they had accepted government grants. The availability of HBC grants after 1953 therefore increased the number of open houses, and this is a neglected cause of the development of the stately home industry. In the conversation between Montagu and Bath that was published in *The Gilt and the Gingerbread* in 1967, both agreed that the access requirements tied to grants were too lenient. They complained that many owners of smaller houses opened 'under protest' after receiving a grant and did not advertise their opening to avoid attracting

[22] John R. R. Bedford, *A Silver-Plated Spoon* (London, 1960), p. 195.
[23] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 367.
[24] Marquess of Bath to Sir Harold Wernher, 12 Aug. 1952, forwarded to David Eccles, TNA, WORK 14/2216. Also quoted in Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 367.
[25] Montagu, *The Gilt and the Gingerbread*, p. 106.

visitors. Bath believed that these owners 'let the side down' by providing a 'frightfully bad impression of a stately home'.[26]

By the 1960s, there was indeed a 'side': a league of country house owners who viewed opening as necessary, whether for grants and tax advantages, as a public duty, or a mixture of both. Their ability to function as a political league would prove crucial to the financial future of privately owned country houses. Until then, owners navigated the changing economy and new taxation policies with very little guidance.

Navigating the land market and the Treasury

While the stately home industry was developing, it became increasingly financially viable to maintain agricultural land and, with it, a country house. Following a long period of instability and decline since the 1890s, the value of agricultural land was on an upward trend from the mid-1950s.[27] Cannadine recorded a revival of confidence in landowning from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s; pointing to the continuation of the 'patrician and paternal' landowning style at the Badminton and Northumberland estates; the Devonshires' return to Chatsworth to inhabit it as a family home for the first time since before the war; and the Calthorpe family's re-development of Edgbaston from 1958.[28] This newfound confidence was encouraged by the Labour government's introduction of a 45% Estate Duty abatement on agricultural land under the 1947 Agriculture Act. F. M. L. Thompson referred to this as 'the friendliest measure of the twentieth century' for Britain's landed society, and Donald Denman reflected that it had 'heartened

[26] Ibid., pp. 106-7.
[27] See A. Jadevicius, S. Huston, A. Baum, and A. Butler, 'Two Centuries of Farmland Prices in England', *Journal of Property Research*, 35/1 (2018), pp. 72–94; T. Lloyd, 'Present value models of agricultural land prices in England and Wales' (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 1992).
[28] Cannadine, *Rise and Fall*, p. 651.

landowners', encouraging them to invest capital in agricultural land improvement.[29] Looking back from 1992, Cannadine referred to c.1955–65 as 'the last, silver age of the country house', before 'the patricians became once again an endangered species' in the mid-1970s.[30] As later chapters will argue, no such endangerment occurred: the value of land continued to rise, and the patricians continued to enjoy tax exemptions.

Rising land values made an enormous difference to those who had parcels of land of which they could comfortably dispose. Mandler has identified the importance of the denationalization of development rights, from 1953–4, in the rapid appreciation of country house owners' capital assets. Denationalization precipitated an early-1960s property boom from which rural landowners benefited.[31] Moreover, in line with the increasing value of agricultural land, the rent yielded from estates improved. At the Powderham Estate in Devon, home to the fourteenth-century Powderham Castle, land was continually sold off through the decades, but sales slowed during the 1960s as rental revenue increased. There was a 240% rise in farm rents through the 1960s and 1970s, compared to a 92% rise through the 1940s and 1950s.[32]

Powderham Castle is a prime example of another survival strategy employed by country house owners at this time: that of transferring ownership of the estate to a discretionary trust. The key feature of a discretionary trust is that appointed trustees are given power over major financial decisions relating to all or part of an estate, which might include the use of income and capital, and even choosing beneficiaries and determining what they receive and when. Income is often shared between multiple beneficiaries, and this wider distribution of income puts its taxation into lower tax brackets than it would be if issued to one individual. Ownership of Powderham was placed in a discretionary trust with a twenty-year term in 1965.[33] This new arrangement secured

[29] F. M. L Thompson., 'Presidential Address: English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century: I, Property: Collapse and Survival', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 40 (1990), p. 4; D. R. Denman, *Estate Capital: The Contribution of Landownership to Agricultural Finance* (London, 1957), pp. 100, 118.
[30] Cannadine, *Rise and Fall*, p. 652.
[31] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 357.
[32] A. J. Jackson, 'Rural property rights and the survival of historic landed estates in the late twentieth century' (PhD thesis, University College London, 1998), p. 180.
[33] Jackson, 'Rural property rights', pp. 148-9.

exemption from Estate Duty in the event of the death of the owner, the Earl of Devon, Lord Courtenay. The trade-off for this was that power over the estate no longer belonged entirely to the Earl, but was also shared by a board of four trustees. The board were given rights to sale, lease, mortgage, develop or demolish the estate, and the family were required to take a leasehold on a flat within the Castle in order to remain living there. However, the trustees included the estate's land agent and a family friend, who were unlikely to oppose the Courtenays' wishes.[34]

In preparation for managing the day-to-day maintenance of the estate, the future Lord Courtenay trained as a land agent during the 1960s, and in 1968 he began to work for Stratton Holborrow, the firm of land agents that had been appointed by the trustees of his family's estate.[35] Historian David Littlejohn has estimated that at least thirty-eight peers in 1997 had been educated at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester.[36] From the 1950s, many owners made strategic long-term decisions to secure a future for the estates in which they were invested, even if they were no longer the sole legal owner. Until 1964, individual absolute ownership was still the most common form of agricultural land ownership, although some families had taken advantage of the tax benefits of other ownership models (such as partnerships via trusts and companies) decades earlier.[37] Discretionary trusts proliferated in the 1960s, and by 1969 they had become the most popular method of avoiding estate duty.[38] Other estates with an historic seat placed in discretionary trusts in this period include Knowsley, Raby, Woburn, and Englefield, among many others.[39] This arrangement was ideal for Woburn Abbey, as Hastings Russell (the 12th Duke of Bedford) did not completely trust his son and heir, Ian Russell, with the responsibility of owning and maintaining the estate single-handedly. Under a discretionary trust, Ian Russell returned from

[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. 149.
[36] D. Littlejohn, *The Fate of the English Country House* (Oxford, 1997), p. 117.
[37] According to Joanna Abecassis, who produced a study of agricultural land ownership forms in 1981, there are no statistics relating to the extent of ownership, tenancy, or management of agricultural land by partnerships prior to 1964. See: J. Abecassis, 'The Development of the Trust as a Form of Agricultural Land Ownership in England' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1981), pp. 177–190.
[38] Cannadine, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 650-51; 'Taxation: Simpler?', *Economist* (26 Sep. 1970), p. 78.
[39] 'Painting 'could have fetched £750,000'', *Guardian* (8 May 1964), p. 7; 'Lord Barnard relinquished big estate', *Daily Telegraph* (20 Oct. 1964), p. 17; Bedford, *A Silver-Plated Spoon*, p. 192; '£2m Englefield Estate Escapes Death Duty', *Daily Telegraph* (18 Jun. 1968), p. 21.

South Africa to run Woburn after his father's death as a tenant of the estate.[40] His guardianship of Woburn was subsequently at the discretion of the trustees. This was an attractive advantage of discretionary trusts for owners with complicated or uncertain succession plans.[41] As described above, the arrangement did not prevent the 13th Duke from presenting himself as Woburn's owner. In their 1966 manual on tax planning, Potter and Monroe commented that 'the discretionary trust has been so successful as an instrument for mitigating the burden of tax and duty, that its likely inclusion among the avoidance devices likely to inspire future anti-avoidance legislation seems inevitable'.[42]

Despite the apparent loophole of discretionary trusts, death duties on large houses, non-agricultural land and chattels remained an obstacle to continued ownership for country house owners. However, there were now funds in place for the government to purchase buildings and objects that had been sold to pay these taxes. When the 10th Duke of Devonshire died unexpectedly in 1950, death duties were levied at eighty per cent on the Devonshire estate. In settlement of just over £1.2 million, the family transferred Hardwick Hall, its contents, and eight significant artworks from the Chatsworth collection to the government in 1957. The total tax due on the estate was over £5 million, and the 11th Duke of Devonshire also transferred ownership of large areas of farming land and tenant buildings in order to pay the bill without relinquishing ownership of Chatsworth.[43] The government was effectively reimbursed for this settlement from the National Land Fund (NLF); the 1956 Finance Act changed the law to enable the NLF to be used to purchase objects of pre-eminent aesthetic value (without the simultaneous purchase of the house).[44] Previously, it was only possible to purchase artworks with the NLF if the building in which they were housed was also purchased by the state.[45] Hardwick Hall was subsequently given

[40] Bedford, *A Silver-Plated Spoon*, p. 194.
[41] Abecassis, 'The Development of the Trust', pp. 253–4.
[42] D. C. Potter, H. H. Monroe, D. A. Shirley, and S. J. L. Oliver, *Potter and Monroe's Tax Planning with Precedents*, 5th edn (London, 1966), p. 173
[43] 'Hardwick Hall and Park for Nation', *Times* (13 Aug. 1957), p. 8.
[44] See: H. Dalton, *High Tide and After: Memoirs 1945–1960* (London, 1962), p. 120.
[45] 'Hardwick Hall and Park for Nation', p. 8.

to the NT. This was an example of the NLF being used precisely as Hugh Dalton, its creator in 1946, had intended.

The NLF and the HBCs were able to function in tandem after 1953, but the various stipulations placed on grants from both schemes often resulted in lengthy negotiations. Dyrham Park, a seventeenth-century Gloucestershire country seat designed by William Talman, was one of the early houses acquired with the aid of both the NLF and English HBC. The estate was initially offered to the government in payment of death duties in 1953–4.[46] The Treasury was unable to accept it, because the property was more valuable than the duty payable, and so the tax bill was eventually settled in cash.[47] In 1954, the English HBC offered a £10,000 grant to cover urgent structural repairs on the house alongside a commitment to a £750 annual grant for ten years, to assist the owners, Justin Blathwayt and family, with maintenance costs. As these were HBC grants, public opening of the house was required as a condition of acceptance. Before the grants were accepted, Blathwayt's wife died unexpectedly. Feeling unable to take on the responsibility of opening the house alone, Blathwayt revived the idea of transferring Dryham to the government, with some land and chattels, in settlement of death duties. As the estate duty bill was recently settled, he asked for a refund of some of the duties already paid in cash.[48] The NT were prepared to take on the house, subject to the government offering sufficient grants. Negotiations continued into 1956, when they were complicated by Blathwayt's decision to put much of the house's contents up for auction at Sotheby's from 29 February. Anxious to prevent the dispersal of the house's collection, the English HBC intervened and requested that the Ministry of Works buy the house, its most important contents, and surrounding land.[49] The Sotheby's sale could not be cancelled, but Dyrham's trustees agreed to buy in the items that the NT and HBC felt ought to remain in the house.[50] In an internal treasury memo, a civil servant

[46] 'Dyrham Park, Glcs.', undated, TNA, T 218/417, fo. 52.
[47] S. Thurley, *Men from the Ministry* (London, 2015), p. 213.
[48] 'Dyrham Park, Glcs.'.
[49] *Parliamentary Papers* (1956/57), 14 (177), Historic Buildings Council for England, Fourth Annual Report, 1956, p. 5; 'Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire', letter from K. Newis (Ministry of Works) to A.H.M. Hillis (Treasury), 21 Feb. 1956, TNA, T 218/417.
[50] *Parl Pap.* (1956/57), 14 (177), p. 5.

noted that the case 'raises again the general issue, whether if an owner is unable or unwilling to find the cash endowment required by the Trust under its country-house scheme, it is right for us to provide it at the expense of the Exchequer, whether under the machinery of the National Land Fund or that of the Historic Buildings Act'.[51] Ultimately, the civil service agreed that the house's historical importance justified a public endowment; the house was on the government's 1948 list of the country's most significant country houses.[52] After protracted negotiations, Dyrham Park and a significant portion of its contents was bought through the NLF for a total of £46,926 (with an additional £7,116 for upfront maintenance costs), and transferred to the NT.[53]

In the case of Dyrham Park, the complexity of the situation explained the drawn-out negotiations rather than any intransigence on the part of the Treasury or MOW. The NT was unsure of the cost of maintaining the house, and spent considerable time inspecting it, and the Sotheby's sale complicated the entire process. Once these obstacles were overcome, the existence of the NLF enabled a relatively straightforward transaction. Around this time, the NLF was also used for several other purchases of country houses in lieu of tax, including Ickworth House in Suffolk (£152,000), Tatton Hall in Cheshire (£125,610), and Saltram House in Devon (£95,000).[54] These houses were all transferred to the NT after relatively smooth negotiation processes, the like of which would not be possible after the reduction of the NLF in 1957.

Although the public aid that was granted to these few buildings came swiftly, the 1950s was also a period of widespread destruction of country houses that had become too expensive to maintain. John Martin Robinson has estimated that nearly a thousand such houses were demolished between 1945 and 1955.[55] This was both a reaction to and a failure of the listing process that had begun in 1947. Owners feared that their houses would be listed, preventing demolition; they therefore rushed to demolish before inspectors reached their region. Meanwhile,

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[51] 'Dyrham Park, Glcs.'.
[52] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 213.
[53] The house and adjoining land was purchased for £5,189, and the contents for £41,737.
See: *Parl Pap.* (1957/58), 19 (168), National Land Fund Account 1956–57, p. 3; *Parl Pap.* (1958/59), 20 (206), National Land Fund Account 1957–58, p. 4.
[54] *Parl Pap.* (1961/62), 25 (70), National Land Fund Account 1960–61, p. 2; *Parl Pap.* (1957/58), 19 (168), p. 2; *Parl Pap.* (1958/59), 20 (206), pp. 2-3.
[55] J. M. Robinson, *The Country House at War* (London, 1989), p. 169.

the process of protecting buildings through listing was making halting progress.[56] When owners did choose to demolish their country house the government was reluctant to intervene. Eden's government received heavy criticism when George Petty-Fitzmaurice, the Marquess of Lansdowne, demolished the Big House (i.e. main block) at Bowood in 1955. Lansdowne felt that the house was beyond any possibility of economic repair and told the press that he had decided to demolish it to make living in what remained of Bowood—an eighteenth-century house largely designed by Robert Adam—economical in the future.[57] James Lees-Milne had provoked widespread anger when he called the lack of protest from architectural preservation groups 'both feeble and shocking' in what became a debate over the demolition in the *Times*' letters section.[58] However, the Advisory Committee on Buildings of Special Architectural and Historic Interest within the MHLG had viewed the house and, as the Committee's Chairman explained in a response to Lees-Milne, agreed with Lord Lansdowne that 'in the case of a house and park of the quality of Bowood a live home was better than a dead museum'.[59] Raymond Cochrane, a reader who appears to have had no personal connection to the case, told the *Times* that he rejoiced 'that Lord Lansdowne has found a means whereby he and his family may continue to live in, and keep fully alive, that part of the house which is of the greater architectural value'.[60] Lansdowne's ultimate goal was to make the house more manageable to continue inhabiting it, and Lees-Milne had long been among those who advocated maintaining country houses as lived-in family homes as the best method of preservation (in line with the Gowers Report). Even the Georgian Group, which counted among its members the most passionate defenders of Georgian architecture, including Summerson, Betjeman, and Hussey, agreed that the decision was 'inevitable'.[61] Preservation groups saw that some buildings were too impractical to save.

Many of the country houses demolished in these years were structures that the current families had no wish to maintain, and were often second, less important, houses. As at Bowood,

[56] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, pp. 233-4.
[57] 'Parts Of Bowood To Be Sold By Auction', *Times* (24 Jun. 1955), p. 12.
[58] 'Bowood', *Times* (28 Jun. 1955), p. 11.
[59] 'Bowood', *Times* (1 Jul. 1955), p. 11.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

the destruction of one house, or part of a house, was viewed as necessary in order to focus resources on the family's main residence. Panton Hall in Lincolnshire, which was abandoned by the Marsden family in the early 1950s in favour of their other house, Thorpe Hall in Louth, was one such example. It was additionally dispensable because the family had only bought it in 1935.[62] Many of the other houses destroyed in this era had similarly long passed out of ownership of their ancestral families, and therefore no individual felt compelled to maintain them. Rushbrooke Hall in Suffolk (d. 1961);[63] Bloxholm Hall in Lincolnshire (d. 1963);[64] and Hafod Uchtryd (summer house) in Cardigan (d. 1958)[65] were such cases. Panmure House in Angus (d. 1960), a mansion house with strong Jacobite associations, was owned by a charity that was unable to find a use for it or sell it on.[66] Many such houses were left to deteriorate, and the number of houses destroyed in these years is inflated by those gutted by fires.[67] Ensuring that an unwanted house could have a new lease of life was not as easy as giving it away; few organisations or individuals were willing to take on such a burden.

While the NT remained an option for houses hit hard by death duties, it became increasingly unwilling to accept ownership of country houses. Cannadine has claimed that 'as early as the mid-1960s, there were signs that the NT was becoming less interested in preserving country houses'.[68] However, these signs appeared even earlier, and can be more accurately described as indicative of active avoidance of further acquisition. Jack Boles, who joined as the NT's Assistant Secretary in the early 1960s, recalled that offers of country houses were discouraged during that decade.[69] Houses had to qualify as nationally, not merely regionally,

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[62] 'Panton Hall', https://houseandheritage.org/2015/11/11/panton-hall/ (15 Mar 2022).
[63] Roy Strong, Marcus Binney, and John Harris, *Destruction of the Country House*, *1875–1975* (London, 1974) p. 24.
[64] 'Lincolnshire HER', https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MLI89153&resourceID=1006 (7 Sep. 2019); Strong et al, *Destruction*, p. 25.
[65] Strong et al, *Destruction*, p. 55.
[66] 'Historic Mansion to be Demolished', *Times* (8 Mar. 1955), p. 10.
[67] Many of the houses listed in *Destruction of the Country House* had been left in ruins as a result of neglect.
[68] D. Cannadine, 'The First Hundred Years' in H. Newby (ed), *The National Trust: The Next Hundred Years* (London, 1995), p. 24.
[69] 'Interview with Sir Jack Boles (NT Director-General 1975-83)', 26 Nov. 1990, British Library, CL1168/356/01.

outstanding; few houses made the grade. In 1960, the NT's previous Secretary, Jack Rathbone, wrote to the Treasury to urge tax exemptions for 'houses of historic or architectural interest' on behalf of both the NT and the NTS. His letter emphasised the undesirability of private houses coming under the NT's care—not only for financial reasons, but because 'much of the interest and value of an historic house is its preservation as a living organism':

> However tactful the Trust's administration may be, country houses in their care tend to acquire something of a museum flavour although the Trusts try to ensure that they retain their character as family homes and do not become lifeless museums.[70]

In advancing this argument, Rathbone positioned the Trusts' interests as inseparable from those of private house owners. This was nothing new; NT executive staff had been among the most vocal supporters of the Gowers Report's recommendations for tax reliefs for private country house owners. Neither the NT or NTS believed they could solve the problem of country house preservation, no matter how much politicians on both sides wanted Trust ownership to become the default method of preservation.

The NT's advocacy on behalf of private country house owners went further. In December 1961, the NT asked for a review of the Gowers Report's recommendations of eleven years earlier.[71] Lord Crawford, NT Chairman, wrote that although much had been achieved via the HBCs, the time had come for 'both the achievements and deficiencies of the present system' to be reviewed, and legislation altered accordingly. Crawford asked for the Treasury to consider exemption from estate duty 'of houses of outstanding merit with their gardens and amenity land, and secondly of funds irrevocably settled to maintain such houses, garden and land', because many outstanding houses had been lost since 1950.[72] The civil service's reply was swift and dismissive: Gowers' recommendations had been thoroughly discussed and rejected; if buildings had been lost, it was not because the present machinery was inadequate, but because of

[70] Letter from Rathbone (Secretary of the National Trust) to R.C. Griffiths (Treasury), 16 Nov. 1960, TNA, T 218/524.
[71] Letter from Lord Crawford (NT) to Selwyn Lloyd (Chancellor of the Exchequer), 19 Dec. 1961, TNA, HLG 126/849, fo. 2–3.
[72] Letter from Lord Crawford to Selwyn Lloyd, fo. 2.

insufficient funding within that machinery.[73] Moreover, aside from objections of principle, the Inland Revenue believed that exemption for houses and attached maintenance funds would create tax havens for business tycoons.[74] In other words, the problems that had prevented the introduction of tax exemptions in the early 1950s were still insurmountable.

Despite rapid growth during the 1960s, the NT remained wary of taking on more country houses. In 1968, they began to use the "Chorley Formula" (named for its creator Roger Chorley, then a member of the Finance Committee), to calculate an endowment sufficient to cover future repairs and maintenance; this sum would be the required accompaniment to any historic property that the NT might accept. Eighteenth-century Erdigg Hall in Wrexham, Wales, was initially declined by the NT because it failed to satisfy the Chorley Formula. The house was on the brink of collapse for many years in the mid-twentieth century. The situation was worsened by subsidence caused by mining below the house.[75] Eventually, a surge in the value of another area of land owned by the house's final private owner, Philip Scott Yorke, enabled him to provide an endowment for the house. The NT accepted in 1973.[76] If it had not been for this exceptional situation, Yorke would likely have been forced to sell the house and its contents separately. The house was one of the NT's most popular sites in Wales in 2019, with the second-largest collection of any property in their care.[77]

While transferring ownership to the NT to ensure a house's future became a less attainable option, the art market provided another means of sustaining private ownership. Given inflation, devaluation of currencies, and the uniqueness of every art object, it is notoriously difficult to write accurately about changes in the art market. Nevertheless, there was undoubtedly a rapid recovery of the market from the 1950s. Increasingly, artworks were being seen as a sound

[73] 'Historic Buildings – Representations by Lord Crawford Brief for Secretary's meeting with the Treasury', 23 Feb. 1962, TNA, HLG 126/849, fo. 7.
[74] 'Historic Houses: National Trusts' Taxation Proposals: Note by Board of Inland Revenue', 14 Mar. 1962, TNA, HLG 126/849, fo. 49–53.
[75] Cornforth, *Country Houses of England*, p. 143.
[76] Cannadine, *Rise and Fall*, p. 655.
[77] Visiting figures for 2018/19 can be found in the National Trust Annual Report 2018/19, https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/201819-annual-report.pdf (9 Aug. 2021), p. 76; 'House and Collection at Erddig', https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/erddig/lists/house-and-collection-at-erddig (9 Aug. 2021).

form of investment. In 1966, Sotheby's Chairman Peter Wilson told the BBC's *Money Programme* that works of art had 'proved to be the best investment' in recent decades.[78] It was a contentious statement, but reflected that the concept of investing in art was no longer novel by the mid-1960s. In his 1970 volume of *The Economics of Taste*, art historian Gerald Reitlinger warned that that this trend would mean 'nothing less than the extinction of true collecting', as buyers concentrated on a possible purchase's potential to appreciate in value.[79] The biggest expansion was in modern painting; between 1951 and 1969, the average price of the most fashionable modern paintings (such as works by Picasso, Bonnard, and Chagall) multiplied almost thirty times.[80] In the same period, Old Master paintings rose in value almost eight-fold, while the cost of living doubled.[81] Reitlinger wrote that, while demand for eighteenth-century portraits was confined to those created by half a dozen household names until the 1930s, in the 1960s there were around fourteen eighteenth-century artists whose work could 'could make the price of a moderately good Reynolds or even a Gainsborough'.[82] This was fortunate for a large section of Britain's country house owners, who possessed significant numbers of such paintings.

When a small injection of cash was needed to fund repair or maintenance, many estates were able to gain the funds they needed by selling one or two key items. Among a long list of examples, a silver dinner service from Berkeley Castle fetched £207,000 at auction in 1960.[83] In 1969, the 10th Earl Fitzwilliam, owner of Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire and Milton Hall in Cambridgeshire, gained £200,000 from a Stubbs frieze.[84] As previously mentioned, in 1956 the legislation was amended to enable acceptance of works of art deemed 'pre-eminent' for their aesthetic merit or historical value, irrespective of any association with a particular building. These artworks could then be moved to other buildings, initiating the flow of artworks from country houses to British galleries and museums. One such artwork was Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast*,

[78] P. Hook, *Rogues' Gallery: A History of Art and its Dealers* (London, 2018), p. 222.
[79] G. Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste*, *vol 3: The art market in the 1960s* (London, 1970), p. 12.
[80] G. Keen, *The Sale of Works of Art: A Study Based on the Times-Sotheby Index* (Norwich, 1971), p. 219.
[81] P. Fuller, 'The £sd of art' in N. Degen (ed), *The Market* (London, 2013), p. 103.
[82] Reitlinger, *Economics of Taste*, vol 3, p. 3.
[83] Ibid., p. 653.
[84] Ibid., p. 345.

which the Earl of Derby sold to the National Gallery in 1964 by private treaty. Derby gained £170,000 in cash from the sale, of which £160,000 came from the gallery's budget, and a further £10,000 from the National Art-Collections Fund. Had the painting sold on the open market, Derby would have been liable for estate duty amounting to about half of the painting's "free market" value, which was thought to be £375,000—or £750,000 according to the trustees of the Derby Estates.[85] Sale proceeds went towards the improvement of the Knowsley Estate, and consequently the maintenance of Knowsley Hall, the Derbys' house near Liverpool.[86] Similarly, in 1969, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool bought a Degas from the Earl of Radnor, of Longford Castle, for £50,000. The painting had been expected to fetch £150,000 at auction, but the avoidance of tax achieved by the private treaty arrangement lessened the loss to the Earl.[87] As these figures suggest, house owners were not necessarily the greatest beneficiaries of these private treaty deals with public museums; their chattels were likely to fetch higher prices on the open market, even after tax. The new funding machinery relied on owners' goodwill, but enabled the government to both acquire artworks for public galleries and retain the foregone tax through reimbursement from the National Land Fund.[88]

In these early years of the HBCs, they were able to work in tandem with the NLF, which facilitated large public purchases such as Dyrham Park. However, the NLF was dramatically reduced by Peter Thorneycroft in 1957, at a time when he, as Chancellor, was attempting to make extensive public expenditure cuts.[89] Hugh Dalton lamented this decision in his autobiography. Dalton wrote that Thorneycroft 'was persuaded by a few blinkered elderly pedants on the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons to cut down the Fund from over £50 millions to £10 millions', because it was not being spent. In reality, the issue had been considered at length

[85] Although artworks deemed to be of sufficient significance were exempt from estate duty as long as they remained unsold, any subsequent commercial sale would attract estate duty at the previously foregone rate. See: 'The ultimate tax', *Economist* (15 Feb. 1969), p. 58.
[86] '£375,000 Rembrandt Sold for £170,000', *Daily Telegraph* (7 May 1964), p. 1; 'Painting 'could have fetched £750,000'', *Guardian* (8 May 1964), p. 7.
[87] 'The ultimate tax'.
[88] For further examples of such arrangements, see Cannadine, *Rise and Fall*, chapter 14; and Littlejohn, *Fate of the English Country House*, pp. 135-147.
[89] O'Hara, *From Dreams to Disillusionment*, p. 12.

by several senior civil servants; in 1954 and 1955, the Treasury and Inland Revenue sustained extensive discussions over alternative uses for the NLF that might prevent it being returned to the Exchequer. Ultimately, however, veteran Treasury official Herbert Brittain, then Second Secretary in the Treasury, believed that it was unjustifiable to spend money on purposes which 'however attractive, cannot be said to be essential'.[90] Moreover, by the mid-1950s the money that had accrued in the NLF was not readily available: it had been invested in government securities, and its income exceeded the total payments taken from it. By 31 March 1955, just under £58 million had been accumulated and only £905,000 spent.[91] Although this money was theoretically earmarked for the NLF, the government would have had to sell securities or borrow money to raise this capital. Dalton felt that the correct approach would have been to spend 'the Fund faster and to good public purpose'; he believed that by reducing the NLF Thorneycroft discouraged 'good deeds' among those who might have given their property to the nation in lieu of tax.[92]

Critics argued that it was only the government's failure to use the NLF to its full potential that was the problem, not a dearth of appropriate cases for which it could be used. The Earl of Wemyss and March, Chairman of the NTS, was among those who protested against the reduction. He wrote to all members of Parliament for Scottish constituencies warning against the depletion of the NLF, which he described as the only instrument through which 'many valuable places and works of art' could be saved in future.[93] Lord Antrim, Chairman of the NT in Northern Ireland, further criticised the government's plans. He emphasised that the NLF had swelled because the government had not used it to provide the NT with the necessary endowments to take over houses, despite the provision made for this purpose under the 1953 Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act.[94]

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[90] 'National Land Fund', letter from Sir Herbert Brittain to Sir Bernard Gilbert, 5 Jul. 1955, TNA, T 227/417.
[91] Memo on the National Land Fund, undated, TNA, T 227/417.
[92] Dalton, *High Tide and After*, p. 120.
[93] 'Scope of National Land Fund', *Glasgow Herald* (25 Jun. 1957), accessed in National Trust Archives, Box 117: 70, 6733.
[94] 'Scope of National Land Fund'.

The government's failure to award the NT grants was discordant with ministers' public support of the NT's potential to safeguard historic buildings. In 1956 Lord Silkin, who had been Minister of Town and Country Planning under Attlee (1945-1950), championed the NT's role as a custodian of country houses. He stated that he had 'never been satisfied that the method of making grants and enabling the owners to go on living in these houses was altogether satisfactory', because 'it savours too much of Public Assistance'.[95] He reiterated the view that had been prevalent within the Attlee cabinet: the only way to 'preserve not the owners of the historic buildings but the historic buildings themselves' was to empower the NT to take on and maintain more houses.[96] When Ickworth in Suffolk was given to the NT in lieu of death duties in 1956, the *Southern Daily Echo* commented that 'it might not have been possible had not Lady Bristol been a wealthy woman in her own right', because the Marchioness of Bristol had provided the endowment—not the NLF.[97] The NLF had, however, made Ickworth's transfer possible by reimbursing the Treasury £232,000 for the foregone tax, and was therefore a crucial support to the NT's acquisition.[98] When NT staff commented on securing NLF transfers a decade later, they noted that 'Treasury officials can be extremely sensitive if they detect any hint of lobbying or of conditions being made'. If the Treasury felt that the NT had discussed arrangements for their acceptance of a property, it was often 'resented and could even damage the chances of getting properties offered to us'.[99]

The Conservative Party's belief that the NLF was emblematic of the previous government's desire to nationalise land lay behind both its underuse and reduction. In 1956, the *Glasgow Herald* stated that it would be 'catastrophic' if 'the State were to use death duties as a

[95] Silkin had brought in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which—as well as enabling councils to take greater action on historic building preservation—enabled local authorities to purchase land compulsorily for the 'public interest' and protected the countryside by discouraging speculative development. Silkin's 1949 Countryside Act, under which ten areas of England and Wales were designated as national parks, chimed with Dalton's insistence on the need to protect the countryside. See: R. Weight, 'Silkin, Lewis, first Baron Silkin (1889–1972), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (4 Oct. 2008), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31684 (27 Nov. 2019).
[96] Hansard, HL Deb 5 July 1956, vol 198, cc 550–551.
[97] 'Death Duties', *Southern Daily Echo* (7 Aug. 1956), accessed in National Trust Archives, Box 117: 70, 6733.
[98] *Parl Pap.* (1957/58), 19 (168), p. 2.
[99] 'Land Fund Transfers', 7 Feb. 1966 (JWFR/JRW/1215), National Trust Archives, Box 117: 70, 6371.

means of extending public ownership', and this concern also came from within the Conservative Party.[100] In 1960 Brendon Sewill, head of the economic section of the Conservative Research Department (CRD) and secretary to the Conservative back-benchers' finance committee, wrote that he considered the NLF 'a concealed means of backdoor nationalisation', and recommended that it should be scrapped.[101] His pamphlet, *Treasure on Earth: a study of death duties*, was not an official party pronouncement. However, given Sewill's position within the CRD, it held weight. It was published immediately before the Conservative Party conference of 1960, where there was expected to be strong demand from constituency associations for a reduction or abolition of Estate Duty.[102] Sewill recommended halving all rates of Estate Duty, to safeguard and encourage private property ownership. His pamphlet demonstrated a lack of understanding of Conservative Party members' views on historic house preservation. Commenting on Sewill's statement that the existing system was cumbersome and obscure, NT Secretary Jack Rathbone wrote to Conservative MP Nicholas Ridley that 'in practice the system allows those concerned—be it the ministers or civil servants or bodies like the Trust—to carry out the intentions of a piece of national, not party-political policy'.[103] Rathbone feared that the current government, Macmillan's, would undermine this arrangement.

Indeed, in the decade following the establishment of HBCs in 1953, the Churchill, Eden, and Macmillan ministries did weaken the system of historic building preservation more than they strengthened it. The 1957 reduction of the NLF was relatively overlooked and unopposed at the time, but it had an enormous impact on attempts to safeguard country houses against destruction in the 1960s. Although country houses' economic situation seemed relatively stable in 1960, thanks to the recovery of the land and art markets, Thorneycroft's depletion of the NLF would

[100] I.e., if Labour's means of justifying higher death duties (if/when they returned to power) was the extension of acceptance-in-lieu provisions, this could be a method of slowly nationalising property. See: 'Paying Death Duties in Kind', *Glasgow Herald* (8 Aug. 1956), accessed in National Trust Archives, Box 117: 70, 6733.
[101] Brendon Sewill, *Treasure on Earth: A Study of Death Duties* (London, 1960), p. 13
[102] '"Halve Estate Duty": Scale for Legacies Proposed', *Times* (10 Oct. 1960), p. 6.
[103] Letter from J. F. W. Rathbone to Nicholas Ridley, 17 Oct. 1960, National Trust Archives, Box 117: 70, 6733.

contribute to another crisis of confidence among country house owners towards the end of the decade.

The birth of a lobby group: The British Travel Association's Historic Houses Committee

Momentum for concerted political action among owners was building as policy changes between 1953 and 1973 steadily undermined their finances. However, early efforts were firmly focused on tourism. Sir Harold Wernher and Lord Montagu had first attempted to form an association of historic house owners in 1952, at a meeting held at the Dorchester Hotel. Wernher was a prominent military officer who had inherited his family's country house, Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire, in 1912. His house was open four days a week in 1950, and Wernher was among the most vocal advocates for open historic houses.[104] Reflecting back on the 1952 meeting, some of those present remembered that,

> About fifty owners attended and a discussion took place in order to decide the best methods of promoting business. Nothing emerged from this meeting because those present were divided into two groups—the larger houses who were satisfied with a good record of attendances and the smaller owners who were financially unable to contribute towards any joint approach to the problem.[105]

Despite Wernher's and Montagu's early attempts, it was not until 1965 that an association of owners was established. This was in the form of an Historic Houses Sub-Committee within the British Travel Association (BTA).

Wernher's planned association was intended to promote owners' individual businesses collectively; this remained the purpose of the group that was eventually formed under the BTA. Montagu described the original committee as carrying 'impressive clout' and bringing together 'many disparate talents' alongside joint experience of running Blenheim Palace, Goodwood,

[104] 'Luton Hoo Collection', *Times* (16 Mar. 1950), p. 9.
[105] 'The BTA Conference of Historic House Owners: Wednesday, May 12, 1965', Castle Howard, BTA: Historic Houses Sub-Committee; 1966–67; 1968–69; 1969–74.

Warwick Castle and Beaulieu.[106] Two of the historic house owners on the Committee were members of parliament: Robert (Robin) Cooke, a Conservative MP and owner of Athelhampton House in Dorset, and Tom Driberg, a Labour MP and owner of Bradwell Lodge in Essex. Driberg was a divisive character: previously Chairman of the Labour Party, he had been a long-time member of the Communist Party and accused of acting as a Soviet spy. Moreover, he was openly homosexual before the decriminalisation of "homosexual acts" in Britain.[107] He remained a member of the Committee until 1973, shortly before his death in 1976, and brought political variety to the group—if not necessarily in the most politically advantageous form.[108]

In the 1960s, the BTA was an accredited agency that the government appointed (and part-funded) to promote British tourism abroad.[109] The Historic Houses Committee (HHC) quickly became an important facet of the BTA, as they represented a significant share of the tourist industry. In 1967, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that privately owned stately homes were receiving more visitors than ever: over five million that year.[110] To put this in perspective, the UK received approximately four million overseas visitors in 1968.[111] Expansion was rapid; the HHC estimated that some 23 million visits were made to historic houses in 1969, of which nearly 3 million were by overseas visitors.[112] Initially, the HHC's activities were tightly focused on improving conditions for houses that opened to the public. For instance, they lobbied for standardised road signs for historic houses throughout the late 1960s.[113] As such, the Committee's early emphasis was very much on the economic contribution of country houses to the nation as tourist attractions, rather than on a necessity to "save" the houses from ruin.

Writing about the HHC in his autobiography, Montagu recalled that,

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[106] Montagu of Beaulieu, *Wheels within Wheels: An Unconventional Life* (London, 2000), p. 158.
[107] R. Davenport-Hines, 'Driberg, Thomas Edward Neil, Baron Bradwell (1905–1976), journalist and politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Jan. 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31047 (9 Aug. 2021).
[108] Montagu, *Gilt and the Gingerbread*, p. 203.
[109] See: Hansard, HL Deb 2 February 1966, vol 272, cc432–81; Interview with Ken Robinson, conducted by Elena Porter, Historic Houses Association (Chester Street), 15 Feb. 2019; in the author's possession.
[110] 'Stately Homes Have Bumper Season', *Daily Telegraph* (18 Oct. 1967), p. 23.
[111] 'Tourism May Boost U. K. Economy by £200m', *Financial Times* (29 May 1969), p. 28.
[112] 'British Tourist Authority: Conference of Historic House Owners 23rd April 1970', Beaulieu, Box 159, p. 13.
[113] 'Historic Properties: BTA publicity and promotion', Castle Howard, 1968-69: Historic Houses Committee.

> Governments were increasingly understanding the importance of tourism and therefore listened to the BTA. They did not yet properly understand the contribution that historic houses could make to the tourist industry as a whole but that would soon change.[114]

Prominent members of the HHC were also valuable ambassadors for Britain abroad, as there was great interest from the foreign press in meeting aristocratic owners of historic houses.[115] Between April 1968 and April 1970, the BTA sent Montagu to the USA, Canada, France, and Australia to promote British tourism. The Marquess of Hertford also acted as a cultural ambassador, to the USA and Denmark.[116]

Montagu was a valuable ally for the BTA, because he was comfortable with publicity and had professional experience of public relations.[117] He received extensive press attention as a member of the aristocracy who was eager to publicise his historic house and motor museum. As Ken Robinson, General Manager of Montagu's businesses at Beaulieu from 1969, described, 'if you picked up your newspapers most weeks, you'd find pictures of him in there'.[118] Montagu was also an effective ally for the BTA in the House of Lords, where he had been an active member since 1948.[119] He had joined the Lords as an instinctive Conservative, but commented that he 'was never hidebound and in some important respects [he] was decidedly left of centre'. When he returned to the House after twelve months' imprisonment in the 1950s, it was as a crossbencher.[120] However, he 'returned to the Conservative fold' after a few years.[121] Montagu raised few debates in the Lords on the issue of historic house maintenance during the 1960s, but made use of opportunities to advocate for greater funding or more lenient taxation for open

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[114] Montagu, *Wheels within Wheels*, pp. 154-5.
[115] Interview with Ken Robinson.
[116] 'The British Travel Association: Minutes of the 3rd Meeting of the Historic Houses Committee', 11 Oct. 1967, Castle Howard, Box 1: BTA: Historic Houses Sub-Committee; 1966-67; 1968-69; 1969-74, p. 5.
[117] Montagu, *Wheels within Wheels*, p. 85.
[118] Interview with Ken Robinson.
[119] Montagu, *Wheels within Wheels*, pp. 203–225.
[120] In 1954, Montagu was convicted for 'homosexual offences' alongside Peter Wildeblood and Michael Pitt-Rivers. As agitation for the decriminalisation of 'homosexual acts' was growing at this time, Montagu gained both admiration from gay rights advocates and notoriety among those who supported the law. See: Montagu, *Wheels within Wheels*, pp. 95–136.
[121] Ibid., p. 213.

houses.[122] In doing so, he emphasised the centrality of historic houses to British tourism, and therefore their economic significance. In 1966, Montagu spoke in favour of increasing financial support for the BTA, commenting that he had received extensive assistance from them in his 'lecture tours to encourage tourists to come to Britain', for which he 'went round the world twice' in 1965.[123] In contributions like these, he positioned himself as an advocate for British tourism generally—not as an advocate for historic houses alone—and, consequently, was not accused of advocating solely on personal (or marginal) interest.

The HHC was well-connected within the realm of heritage funding, as it was closely associated with the HBC for England. Under Harold Wilson's Labour government, which had been elected in 1964 initially, and re-elected with a consolidated majority in 1966, the annual grant ceiling for the HBC for England was increased several times. In 1970, the HHC claimed that they 'could take some credit' for this, because three members of their Committee were members of the Council in the late 1960s.[124] These were Hugh Wontner (the HHC's Chairman), Tom Driberg, and the Earl of Euston. The HBC for England had continually argued that their funding was inadequate, and in 1965 stated that private owners had 'rarely' benefited from maintenance grants.[125] From a £40,000 annual allocation in 1953, the HBC for England's funding increased to £450,000 in 1963/64; £550,000 in 1967/68; £575,000 in 1969/70; and £700,000 in 1970/71. Given that Wilson's ministries of 1964–70 were preoccupied with successive sterling crises, the Labour government's willingness to raise grant allocations by any amount demonstrated a commitment to maintain the system that had been established under Churchill's Conservative ministry.[126]

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[122] The majority of Montagu's contributions in the House of Lords during the 1960s were on road safety. See: Montagu, *Wheels within Wheels*, p. 208. This is confirmed by contributions to speeches listed in Hansard: 'Mr Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu', https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/people/mr-edward-douglas-scott-montagu/index.html (27 Jun. 2019).
[123] Hansard, HL Deb 2 February 1966, vol 272, c464.
[124] 'British Tourist Authority: Historic Houses Committee, Report of Activities: April 1968 to April 1970', Beaulieu, Box 141, BTA — Historic Houses Committee, p. 9.
[125] *Parl Pap.* (1966/67), 36 (39), Historic Buildings Council for England, Thirteenth Annual Report, 1965, p. 4.
[126] Re: sterling crises see S. Newton, 'The Two Sterling Crises of 1964 and the Decision Not to Devalue', *The Economic History Review*, 62/1 (Feb. 2009), pp. 73-98; H. Pemberton, 'Relative Decline and British Economic Policy in the 1960s', *The Historical Journal*, 47/4 (Dec. 2004), p. 1003.

Nevertheless, these increases were less generous than they appear to be. As Lord Hailes, Chairman of the HBC for England, had commented in 1968, they were offset by rising costs and inflation.[127] Taking into account a high rise in building costs and, particularly, the costs of repairing historic buildings that resulted from shortage of craftspeople, the HBC believed that the allocation of £400,000 in 1959 had been worth more in real terms than the 1969/70 allocation of £575,000.[128] Addressing the new Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Walker, in their report for 1969–70, the Committee wrote, 'We urge you, as we urged your predecessor, to consider additional means of reducing the exceptional burden of repairing and maintaining historic buildings'.[129]

The HBCs were not alone in advocating other means of improving the economic situation of country houses in the late 1960s. In 1968, the HHC began their own systematic lobbying on the issue. Their growing belief in the need for concerted political action is evident in George Howard's letter to Leonard Lickorish, Director General of the BTA, on 22 April 1968. Howard outlined his belief that the 'financial situation of historic buildings generally' required a review and overhaul:

> The real difficulty is, of course, that a number of owners are still very wealthy, and this is assumed by all but a few in the know to be true also of the owners of other houses. The so-called minor provisions of this year's Finance Bill add up to a concerted attack on the idea of wealth, and it is this, I am sure, which provides the only justification for our request that a delegation should be received by the Chancellor. What I think we shall have to do is to ask for a complete re-casting of the provisions relating to ownership and maintenance of historic houses in private hands. I do not believe that tinkering with the existing system is really going to do any good for there is no doubt in my mind that special provisions will have to be made to cover the very limited number of cases involved, and that the Revenue will detest this as any provisions which might do any good would be quite unlike taxation provisions for other trades, businesses and sources of income.[130]

To gain support for such a transformation of the preservation system, Montagu tabled a debate on the difficulties of maintaining Britain's historic houses and castles in May 1968. Opening the

[127] HL Deb 15 May 1968, vol 292, c356.
[128] *Parl Pap.* (1970/71), 22 (258), Historic Buildings Council for England, Seventeenth Annual Report, 1969-70, p. 4.
[129] Ibid., p. 5.
[130] Letter from G. Howard to L. Lickorish, 22 Apr. 1968, Castle Howard, 1969–74: Historic Houses Committee.

debate, he called attention to the 'discrimination against [privately owned houses] in various taxation methods' when compared to properties owned by the Ministry of Public Building and Works and the NT.[131] The spirit of the debate was almost universally supported by the peers who contributed to it, with the exception of the Earl of Dundee, who felt that it was ill-timed to ask the government to spend more money on historic properties when Wilson's second ministry was facing criticism for overspending.[132] The Earl of Huntingdon, Lord Methuen, and Lord Vivian were among those who supported Beaulieu's calls for tax reform to aid historic house owners. Sir Westrow Holse, owner of Breamore House in Hampshire, later wrote to Montagu in support. He told Montagu that he was no longer able to make a profit from opening his house under the present level of taxation, and therefore did not have sufficient funds for the property's maintenance. He could 'not wait to move into a small cottage', feeling that he and his fellow house owners 'can not be expected to continue as unpaid curators for the benefit of the public with nothing but hard-work at weekends when we want to rest after our hard week in the office in London'. He told Montagu that 'any pressure you and your committee and the B.T.A. can bring to bear on the Government to produce funds and the H.B.C. to push them round to those in need would I am sure be appreciated in general'.[133]

The Parliamentary Secretary for the MHLG, Wayland Young, 2nd Baron Kennet, was one of the ministers most involved with the HHC in this period. He was the government's representative at this 1968 debate. Kennet was a journalist when he took up his father's seat in the Lords in 1960, having served in the Royal Navy and the Foreign Office. Although a member of the Labour Party during his time as Parliamentary Secretary of the MHLG, he was towards the right of the Party and later joined the Social Democratic Party.[134] Kennet was firmly against the HHC pursuing further tax concessions. He told the House,

> We must devise a principle of partnership in this matter between public and private enterprise. The private owner could combine his private property, his house and his park,

[131] HL Deb 15 May 1968, vol 292, cc325–78.
[132] Ibid., c345.
[133] Letter from Sir Westrow Bart to Edward Montagu, 25 May 1968, Beaulieu, Box 141, BTA — Historic Houses Committee 1967-1969.
[134] 'Obituary: Lord Kennet', *Guardian* (12 May 2009), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/12/politics-society (12 Apr. 2021).

> his private initiative and his sense of tradition and what is appropriate, with public skill from the British Travel Association (which is a governmental organisation) and public money in the form of an Historic Buildings Council repair loan, in order to get the best social and economic use out of the asset which is his by law but which belongs to all of us by sentiment.[135]

In particular, Kennet felt that there was no justification for exempting houses, alongside chattels, from estate duty. He argued that the chattels exemption was created to stem 'the "rush of Rubens" to America', but the same considerations did not apply to houses.[136]

Kennet was consistent in advocating for a form of public-private partnership that avoided targeted tax concessions. At the HHC's 1970 conference, despite praising the 'hundreds of owners who open their homes and their gardens to the public at no profit to themselves', Kennet said that he supported 'the ideal all-in arrangement of the future'. Under this arrangement the house, owned by either 'the original family' or the NT, would be maintained by HBC grants, and its chattels would remain there under estate duty concessions. Part of the grounds would be owned by the county council as a park, and another area designated for an additional attraction such Beaulieu's motor museum or Woburn's safari park.[137] The estates of Goodwood, Burton Constable, Knebworth, and Stratfield Saye offered partial examples of the kind of partnerships for which he was advocating; they opened grant-aided country parks as a result of the 1968 Countryside Act, which gave greater powers to local authorities to establish and fund parks.[138] Robert Cooke, a Conservative MP and member of the HHC, told Kennet that he had 'painted a somewhat sickening picture of the institutionalized historic building and its surroundings', when owners were attempting to preserve their houses 'as lived in, lively places'. Kennet responded that the ideal arrangement he described was not an attempt to institutionalize houses, but merely a realistic way of bringing money in. He urged owners to 'forget about tax concessions', because he could not imagine the government creating a special tax category for them; the grants system was 'the field

[135] HL Deb 15 May 1968, vol 292 c339.
[136] Ibid., c 375.
[137] 'British Tourist Authority: Conference of Historic House Owners 23rd April 1970: Summary of Proceedings', p. 5.
[138] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 397; 'Countryside Act 1968', https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/41/enacted (3 Apr. 2021).

in which there was hope'.[139] Kennet's concept of a public-private partnership may have seemed "institutionalized" to Cooke, but it was still a far cry from the extensive public ownership of historic estates for which Dalton and Gaitskell had advocated under Attlee. Macmillan's plans to place the NT at the forefront of government-aided historic house preservation when he was MHLG Minister (1951–4), were closer to Kennet's ideas. Kennet may have maintained his stance against tax concessions, but he encouraged further public funding of private ownership in the form of grants. The Labour government was now consistently supporting private ownership in principle, although they remained resistant to funding it.

The HHC's approach to lobbying in the late 1960s was both slow and focused on enduringly unpopular tax concessions. In July 1967, they persuaded Lord Kennet that it 'could now be an opportune time to submit a carefully considered paper on the taxation aspects of historic houses finance', but failed produce such a paper that year.[140] In May 1968, they secured a meeting with the Minister of State for the Treasury, Dick Taverne, who received a delegation 'from both large and small houses and from both political Parties' to discuss the financial problems of historic houses open to the public.[141] The delegation voiced concerns over unequal tax treatment between publicly and privately owned houses, and gave specific suggestions for reform of income tax, estate duty, Selective Employment Tax, grants and loans.[142] They told the Minister that the qualifying test for income tax relief (as implemented in the 1952 Income Tax Act), that houses must be 'managed on a commercial basis with a view to the realisation of profits', was unfair because some houses would never be profitable, and urged a reconsideration of the way that houses managed on a commercial basis might be assisted.[143] There was, however, little progress made on these issues during the remaining two years of Wilson's first premiership.

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[139] 'British Tourist Authority: Conference of Historic House Owners 23rd April 1970: Summary of Proceedings', p. 5.
[140] 'British Tourist Authority: Minutes of the 3rd Meeting of the Historic Houses Committee', 11 Oct. 1967, Beaulieu, Box 141, BTA — Historic Houses Committee, p. 2.
[141] HL Deb 15 May 1968, vol 292, c330–1.
[142] 'Delegation of historic house owners to the Minister of State, Treasury, on Tuesday, 14th May 1968', Beaulieu, Box 141, BTA — Historic Houses Committee.
[143] 'Note of meeting held in the Minister of State's room, H.M. Treasury, on 14th May, 1968', Castle Howard, BTA: Historic Houses Sub-Committee, Historic Houses Committee 1968-69.

When the Committee submitted recommendations to the Chancellor, foremost among which was estate duty exemption for significant houses, the election that ousted Labour from government was mere months away.[144]

This was a particularly difficult period in which to lobby for tax concessions. Labour introduced several major tax reforms after gaining office in 1964. In the 1965 budget, Chancellor Jim Callaghan introduced Capital Gains Tax (CGT), which was part of Labour's attempt to modernise the economy and shift the focus of fiscal policy away from taxation of income and towards taxation of unearned wealth.[145] The new tax was levied at a flat rate of thirty per cent and applied to gains realised on all assets, with limited exceptions including primary residences, and goods and chattels valued under £1,000.[146] Labour had also considered introducing an annual tax on wealth when planning for the 1965 budget, on the advice of economist Nicholas Kaldor.[147] This would have significantly worsened country house owners' economic situation, but it could not be dismissed by owners as a socialist attempt to redistribute wealth; even the Conservative Party, in opposition, were considering a wealth tax at this time. From 1965, the party's Policy Group began to discuss an annual wealth tax as a way to offset lowered income tax.[148] This new tax would enable the reduction of CGT and death duties, but was intended to aid accumulation of new wealth rather than maintain old wealth, by encouraging high-risk, high-yield investment.[149] Country house owners would only be able to benefit from this fiscal policy if they were exempted from the annual tax while enjoying the benefits of lower CGT and death duties. Fortunately for them, the Shadow Cabinet abandoned the wealth tax proposal in 1968 and it did not become part of the Conservative's election manifesto. As historian Martin Daunton explains, the policy was considered dangerously close to taxes that the Labour party was considering at the time, and there

[144] 'British Tourist Authority: Historic Houses Committee, Report of Activities: April 1968 to April 1970', p. 9.
[145] H. Pemberton, 'Taxation and Labour's Modernisation Programme' in G. O'Hara and H. Parr (eds.), *The Wilson Governments 1964–1970 Reconsidered* (Abingdon, 2006), p. 120; M. Daunton, *Just Taxes: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1914–1979* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 286–290.
[146] Hansard, HC Deb 6 April 1965, vol 710, c245.
[147] Daunton, *Just Taxes,* pp. 286, 290.
[148] 'Policy Group on Future Economic Policy, 6th meeting, 27 Oct. 1965', Conservative Parliamentary Archives, CRD, 3/7/6/9, PG/8/65/34, comment made by Angus Maude.
[149] Daunton, *Just Taxes*, p. 316.

were fears the Conservatives would be paving the way to further socialist fiscal policy if they introduced their own wealth tax.[150]

When the British Travel Association became the British Tourist Authority, a statutory government body, in 1970, there was greater incentive to form an independent association of historic houses. The government took control of the BTA as part of the measures introduced under the Development of Tourism Act (1969), which intended to centralise Britain's tourism bodies. Previously, the government had been criticised for failing to co-ordinate the complicated array of organisations that claimed authority over various elements of the tourist industry.[151] The Act also created separate tourist boards for England, Scotland, and Wales, so that promotion of tourism could be more easily tailored to each country and its regions.[152] The HHC continued to exist as an advisory group to the BTA, but individual historic house owners were unable to remain members. During the 1970 Conference of Historic House Owners, the HHC discussed how owners could remain involved in their activities, despite this new status.[153] The owners who had united under the HHC saw that it was necessary to form a new organisation if they were to retain the little political momentum they had achieved. George Howard worried that, as a government agency, the BTA would now be 'less economical and more Civil Service minded', which provided further incentive for separate representation.[154]

At this moment of transition, the largest country estates (such as Chatsworth, Castle Howard, or Woburn Abbey) no longer formed the majority of the country house visiting market. More and more smaller country houses were opening, partly because opening was a requirement for the receipt of HBC grants. Brian Thompson, owner of Puttenden Manor, a fifteenth-century manor house in Surrey, wrote to Lord Montagu to request assistance with an 'Association of Historic House Owners' for owners in the south of England. He told Montagu,

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[150] Ibid., p. 318.
[151] Hansard, HC Deb 13 May 1968, vol 764, c978.
[152] 'Development of Tourism Act 1969', https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1969/51 (15 Mar. 2022).
[153] 'British Tourist Authority: Conference of Historic House Owners 23rd April 1970: Summary of Proceedings', p. 5.
[154] 'Letter from G Howard to Hugh Wontner, BTA, 12 December 1969', Castle Howard, Box.1: BTA: Historic Houses Sub-Committee; 1968-69, Historic Houses Committee.

> It is comparatively easy for a nationally known titled occupant of some exquisite palace to obtain grants, permission, credit and publicity but quite a different matter for the smaller untitled impecunious Historic House Owner who lacks "political pressure". By bonding together, however, a number of us may be able to make our presence felt in the face of adversity and by making certain people realize that it is not sufficient to praise us or our houses and then impose impossible taxation upon us. We may be able to fight for legislation which will cater for the needs of those who preserve the country's heritage instead of pandering to the whims and fancies of doctrinaire political fanatics.[155]

Thompson added that 'the present spate of legislation, increasing taxation and bureaucratic interference is making our lives intolerable'. His comments implied a schism between the interests of the 'smaller untitled impecunious' house owners and the prominent celebrity figures who presided over the most-visited stately homes. Montagu had denied reports of such a rift in 1967, when the *Daily Telegraph* reported that Major E.C. Eyre, owner of the Elizabethan Sawston Hall near Cambridge, had considered resigning from the HHC because of a lack of representation for small houses.[156] Montagu responded that Major Eyre, Maxwell Stuart, Robert Cooke, and Tom Driberg all provided Committee representation for small open houses that received fewer than 20,000 annual visitors.[157] Nevertheless, resentment from owners of smaller houses who felt inadequately represented by the HHC would influence the association that was eventually formed to replace it.

The other organisation acting in the interests of country house owners in the late 1960s was the Country Landowners' Association (CLA). The CLA was more established as a lobby group than the HHC, and they campaigned to safeguard the conservation of privately owned estates. In 1967, Montagu reflected that many of the tax reliefs and concessions from which Beaulieu Estate benefited were enacted as a direct result of the CLA's representations to the government.[158] However, the CLA were not the most appropriate body to act as the primary representative of historic house owners. As Norman Hudson, who was then working as a land agent, has recalled, 'to some extent the people's perception of landownership was very different

[155] Letter from B. D. Thompson to Lord Montagu, undated, Beaulieu, Box 141, BTA — Historic Houses Committee.
[156] 'Rift in Stately Homes Body Threatened', *Daily Telegraph* (11 Jul. 1967), p. 16.
[157] 'No Disagreements in Committee', *Daily Telegraph* (18 Jul. 1967), p. 14.
[158] Montagu, *The Gilt and the Gingerbread*, pp. 193–4.

from that of the poor historic house owner who had struggled'.[159] Particularly as agricultural income revived in the 1960s, it was in house owners' interests to differentiate the activity of running a country house from the status of being a landowner. An outside observer might question why a landowner would not dispose of assets from which they were unable to make a profit, but a country house owner could present both sentimental and broader cultural reasons for holding onto the particular financial burden of the crumbling country seat—and, in doing so, gain greater sympathy from both the public and the government.

The end of the HHC's incorporation within the BTA coincided with capital tax changes that affected a significant number of country houses. The 1969 Finance Act included Estate Duty provisions that were specifically aimed at closing the "loophole" created by discretionary trusts. Effectively, discretionary trusts lost their capital tax exemption. From 1969, when an eligible beneficiary died, the trustees were compelled to consider the previous seven years and calculate what proportion of the trust income had been paid to the deceased over that period. That proportion of estate assets was then chargeable to Estate Duty.[160] This removed the benefit of the trusts that had accounted for the considerable increase in their popularity before 1965. Further, the 1969 Finance Act also made discretionary trusts liable for CGT on the capital appreciation of underlying assets, which had been introduced in the 1965 Finance Act. This meant that capital appreciation of the trusts' underlying assets was liable for tax every fifteen years, regardless of whether the capital was realised.

All these changes contributed to the feeling that the "recovery period" for country houses had ended in 1965, the year that CGT and Selective Employment Tax (SET) were introduced. SET was a tax on employers intended to subsidise British manufacturing, charged at a flat rate of 25s. a week for men, 12s. 6d. for women and boys, and 8s. for girls.[161] Open houses with many employees were therefore significantly affected by this tax. Simultaneously, the effects of CGT

[159] Interview with Norman Hudson, conducted by Elena Porter, High Wardington House, 28 Jan. 2019; in the author's possession.
[160] 'Taxation: Simpler?', *Economist* (26 Sep. 1970), p. 78; 'Tax threat to historic houses', *Times* (2 Jan. 1970), p. 6; see also Jackson, 'Rural property rights', p. 153 for an example of how the 1969 Act affected a particular estate (Powderham).
[161] Hansard, HC Deb 3 May 1966, vol 727, cc1453–9.

were exacerbated by rising inflation.[162] William Proby (owner of Elton Hall and a President of the HHA in the 1990s) later reflected that 'country houses were particularly vulnerable [to CGT] since fiscal drag and poor performance of the stock market restricted the incomes of country house owners, while expenditure (based heavily on labour costs) soared.[163] Writing in 1969, John Cornforth told *Country Life* readers that 'those concerned for the future of great country houses and gardens saw that the years of recovery were over' in 1965. He claimed that in the ten years before 1965 'there were no major losses except through fire, and a surprising number of country houses were extensively restored, an achievement greatly helped by the system of Historic Buildings Council grants'.[164] Destructions declined after a peak in the mid-1950s, but the statement that there were 'no major losses except through fire' was false; Mark Girouard counted 302 demolitions between 1955 and 1964.[165] Cornforth's statement demonstrates how dramatically perceptions of country houses' economic status had shifted in a short period: 1955 became a year of sudden recovery, and 1965 a year of sudden decline. Harold Wernher told the 1970 conference of historic house owners that 'continued inflationary trends, pay rises, etcetera, and the additional burden of S.E.T. which was placed upon us in 1969, have pressed very heavily on the owners who are attempting to make both ends meet, let alone make a profit'.[166] The 1969 Finance Act had exacerbated the burdens of the 1965 Act.

The case of Heveningham Hall in Suffolk exemplified the financial situation of estates held in discretionary trusts after 1969. The enormous eighteenth-century country house was celebrated for its James Wyatt interiors and Capability Brown landscape. Heveningham's owner, Andrew Vanneck, had died in 1965 and left the house in a discretionary settlement for his family.[167] Because the deed on the house had been drawn up in 1955, the first tax instalment—

[162] For a history of Capital Gains Tax in the United Kingdom, see A. Seely, 'Capital gains tax : background history' (Standard Note SN860, updated 2 June 2010, House of Commons Library), http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN00860/SN00860.pdf (27 Apr. 2021).
[163] 'The Fiscal Climate for Country Houses since 1965', *Apollo*, 130/334 (1 Dec. 1989), p. 404.
[164] 'The Future of Heveningham', *Country Life* (18 Sep. 1969), p. 670.
[165] Mark Girouard, 'Country House Crisis?', *Architectural Review,* 156 (Oct. 1974), p. 243.
[166] 'British Tourist Authority: Conference of Historic House Owners 23rd April 1970: Summary of Proceedings', p. 2.
[167] 'The Future of Heveningham', pp. 671–2.

thirty per cent of the capital appreciation on the trust—was due in 1970. Believing that this charge would ruin the estate, the family wanted to sell before 1970. They gave the government a deadline of 31 December 1969 to decide whether to purchase the house and estate, excluding house contents, for £250,000.[168] The family had poured a great deal of money into the house since 1965 and opened it to the public in 1967. The government were therefore unable to claim that the owners were shirking their responsibility to maintain the house and expecting the state to pick up the burden; it was the new liability for CGT—rather than any unwillingness to run the house—that had forced the sale. David Wheeler, husband of Margite Wheeler, who had inherited the estate, told the *Times* that the sale pre-empted 'the really difficult period' of 1970 to 1985, at the end of which 'the estate would be finished as an economic entity'. Wheeler believed the tax bill for 1985 might reach £100,000.[169] However, civil servants were reluctant to purchase Heveningham, preferring it to be bought privately. They shared this view with John Cornforth, who described private purchase as 'obviously the best solution, provided the original furniture is included in the deal and can be tied to the house permanently'.[170] The NT were unable to take on the house directly, because the family could not provide an endowment. Eventually, the state bought the house, the most important furniture, and 477 acres of land for £300,000.[171]

Edward Montagu and George Howard used the publicity surrounding this case as a platform for their wider criticism of government policy towards historic houses and estates. Montagu told the press that the government had been forced into an embarrassing situation over Heveningham, by being prepared to use taxpayers' money to buy a house that they had forced to the market by excessive taxation. He called it "mad economics".[172] Howard was Chairman of the CLA at this time, and his main objection to the handling of the situation was that the government had not gained any capital through taxing the estate; the money that the government would have

[168] 'The Future of Heveningham', p. 672; 'Heveningham Hall at the eleventh hour', *Times* (31 Dec. 1969), p. 10.
[169] 'Tax threat to historic houses'.
[170] 'The Future of Heveningham', pp. 672–3.
[171] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 214.
[172] 'Tax threat to historic houses'.

gained in tax, and more, went straight into the public purchase of the Hall.[173] Hugh Wontner, Chairman of the HHC, used the occasion to complain that owners had made great efforts to 'grant every possible facility to those who wish to visit [their houses], and it is very much to be hoped that penal taxation provisions that gnaw at the roots of a national heritage of such great value should, as soon as possible, be alleviated'.[174]

The episode demonstrated that large-scale purchases like those facilitated by an undiminished NLF before 1957 were still possible in 1970, but they were much more difficult for the government to arrange and justify. The basic logic of the funding system implemented in 1953 remained the same: country houses were not exempt from capital taxation, but their owners could surrender artworks and land—and, as a last resort, the historic house itself—in order to meet tax bills. However, as capital taxes increased and became harder to avoid, grants and in lieu provisions were increasingly viewed by country house owners and their supporters as an inadequate counter-balance to taxation.

* * *

On 2 February 1971, members of the HHC met to establish a Standing Committee that would report to the BTA. As the next chapter will detail, it was from this body that the Historic Houses Association (HHA) was formed in 1973. The focus of this new organisation was, like that of the HHC, the improvement of conditions for open country houses. Although the HHA appeared to differ from the HHC in the prominence and urgency that it gave to lobbying for the reduction of capital taxes, the groundwork for the HHA's early campaigns on taxation was laid by the HHC in the late 1960s. Sporadically, members of the HHC, NT staff, and architectural writers such as John Cornforth had called for the government to revisit the Gowers Report's recommendation of tax exemptions for historically significant properties (i.e. not only contents) since 1953.

[173] Ibid.
[174] 'Heveningham Hall', *Times* (6 Jan. 1970), p. 9.

It was not until the very end of the 1960s that the HHC initiated organised and consistent lobbying on this issue. Nevertheless, these lobbying activities prior to the official establishment of the HHA in November 1973 demonstrate that there was a greater sense of political direction in the "the country house lobby" than has previously been acknowledged in histories of the political treatment of country houses. The leaders of the HHC had developed political credibility through their expertise in tourism and involvement with the BTA. They were known to government officials as key figures within the tourist industry, not only as aristocrats and country house owners. This was a crucial foundation for the influence that they would exert in the mid-1970s.

Chapter Three

Crisis? Whose Crisis?

The Wealth Tax and the Historic Houses Association, 1973–76

> This study … is a statement about a situation that was already seen to be deteriorating in 1972 and 1973, and now appears to be developing into a major crisis that threatens not only our architectural and aesthetic heritage but makes a nonsense of conservation policy.[1]
>
> John Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain: Can they Survive?* (London, 1974)

In 1972, the Historic Houses Standing Conference (HHSC), an advisory body to the British Tourist Authority (BTA), commissioned the Architectural Editor of *Country Life*, John Cornforth, to produce a 'wholly independent' report on the financial situation of country houses in Britain.[2] The report was published in May 1974 under the title *Country Houses in Britain: Can they Survive?* Cornforth concluded that the situation was 'developing into a major crisis', and yet his report demonstrated that independently owned country houses already received the lion's share of government funding for preservation of built heritage.[3] The problem, from his perspective, was not that governments did not currently support independently owned country houses in principle, but that policy and funding arrangements did not go far enough to offset taxation. In questioning just how far state support should go, and what exemptions should be made for those who were deemed to be asset rich but (relatively) capital poor, debates raised at this time forced lobbyists

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[1] John Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain: Can they Survive? An Independent Report* (London, 1974), p. 129.

[2] The British Tourist Authority has been known as VisitBritain since 2003, when it merged with the English Tourist Board, see: DCMS, 'Triennial Review of VisitBritain and VisitEngland', (London, Mar. 2015), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411968/TR_Report__final_.pdf (15 Mar. 2022).
It became fully operational as the British Tourist Authority in 1970, when it took over from the British Travel Association as Britain's national tourist association. In 1970 it consisted of its Chairman, Sir Alexander Glen, representatives of the tourist boards of England, Scotland, and Wales, and five members appointed by the Board of Trade, see: British Tourist Authority, '1st Annual Report of the British Tourist Authority for the Year Ended 31 March 1970' (London, 1970).

[3] Miles Glendinning has argued that Cornforth's statistics did not support his stance, 'suggesting that, of 2,000 notable surviving country houses, only a quarter faced even minor threats', see: M. Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation: Antiquity to Modernity* (London, 2013), p. 352.

and politicians to ask fundamental questions of British society in the 1970s. What did it mean to be a private owner of a portion of the 'national heritage', and what constituted that heritage? What did the country house actually represent, and what part of it should the state preserve? In other words, what exactly was it that 1970s governments were being asked to save?

Language of 'crisis' abounded in 1970s Britain. It has dominated historiography of the period since. In popular memory, Edward Heath's Conservative government was defined by two miners' strikes, escalating inflation, and the power cuts of 1973–4, resulting in a three-day working week in December 1973 and the snap election of February 1974.[4] Harold Wilson's subsequent Labour government was similarly dogged by perceived crises, culminating in the 1978–9 'winter of discontent'.[5] This view of the seventies contributed to the creation of a 'declinist' thesis during the remainder of the century, whereby scholars argued that post-war Britain saw a steady decline in its global political and economic strength. In this view, the "crises" of the seventies were a culmination of several decades of decline, and the result of political failure to reverse it.[6] Theories of decline, often referred to under the umbrella term 'cultural critique', placed much of the blame for this alleged economic backwardness on a backward-looking elite culture; the industrial middle class had subsumed itself within aristocratic, inefficient values fixated on the countryside and sacrificed technological training as a result.[7]

However, recent scholarship has challenged the 'declinist' thesis. Historians have argued that politicians of the 1980s exaggerated and exploited the popular conception of the previous decade as one of crises.[8] The thesis has been further undermined by a rejection of the neat

[4] E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and N. Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/2 (2017), pp. 268-304; B. Jackson and R. Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 4.
[5] D. Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974–1979* (London, 2012), p. 758.
[6] See, for example: A. Seldon and K. Hickson (eds), *New Labour, Old Labour: The Blair, Wilson and Callaghan Governments (1974–1979)* (London, 2004).
[7] Corelli Barnett (*The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London, 1986)) and Martin Wiener (*English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge, 1981)) are key proponents of this thesis. For discussion of their work and its influence, see: R. English and M. Kenny, 'British Decline or the Politics of Declinism?', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1/2 (1999), pp. 252–266; and D. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London, 2018), pp. 389–394.
[8] For a historiographical overview of 'declinism' see S. Poiron, 'Reassessing a Turbulent Decade: The Historiography of 1970s Britain in Crisis', *Études Anglaises*, 69/3 (2016), pp. 301–320.

periodisation of the seventies as divorced from the 'swinging sixties' and as the decade of a collapse in confidence in the political system that 'ensured the acceptance of the Thatcher revolution'.[9] David Edgerton and Dominic Sandbrook have emphasised that the seventies, while not as productive for Britain as for its competitors such as France and Germany, was a decade of growing affluence for most British people.[10] The gap between rich and poor was narrowing until 1976.[11] While the "crises" of the seventies were widely felt by the British public—in the form of strike action, high inflation and limited electricity, for example—they overlaid gradual improvement in most people's quality of life.

Nevertheless, when prime minister Jim Callaghan implied that Britain's troubles were insignificant from an international perspective, and was subsequently misreported as uttering the phrase "Crisis? What crisis?", on his return from a summit in Guadeloupe in January 1979, he appeared to be hopelessly out of touch.[12] Public services were not operating at the level that the public had come to expect. Callaghan may have believed that the press constructed a crisis, but the subsequent popular resonance of the "winter of discontent" reveals that there was a basis for the construction.[13] By contrast, the "country house crisis" never truly materialised.

From 1972, the threat of a wealth tax appeared to signal the beginning of an impossibly hostile economic situation for independent country house owners. Rumours circulated that, if elected, a new Labour government would introduce an annual tax on assets, including houses

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[9] Geoffrey Howe, endorsement of Ronald McIntosh, *Challenge to Democracy: Politics, Trade Union Power and Economic Failure in the 1970s* (London, 2006), quoted in R. Saunders, ''Crisis? What Crisis?' Thatcherism and the Seventies', in B. Jackson and R. Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain*, p. 25.
Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton noted the arbitrariness of 'decaditis' and opted to explore 'what the 1970s means as an adjective, not just as a period of time', see: 'Introduction. The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the 1970s?', in L. Black, H. Pemberton and P. Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 3.
[10] Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, p. 283.
[11] Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun*, p. 27.
[12] J. Shephard, 'The Fall of the Callaghan Government, 1979' in T. Heppell and K. Theakston (eds), *How Labour Governments Fall: From Ramsay MacDonald to Gordon Brown* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 125.
[13] It is not the intent of this chapter to reassess the true extent of the state "crisis" or what it entailed. The reality of the situation is not as relevant as the widespread use of the language of crisis, in the context of the country house lobby's perception of their own crisis. For discussion of the 'discursive construction' of the 'winter of discontent' see: C. Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent', *Sociology*, 30/2 (May 1996), pp. 253–277; idem, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63/3 (2010), pp. 446-470.

worth more than £100,000.[14] Five months after Labour did come to power in March 1974, under Harold Wilson, the new government published a green paper for a wealth tax. In its foreword, Chancellor Denis Healey stated that the intention of the wealth tax was that 'excessive inequalities of wealth will in time be eroded'. The principle was that income—on which the existing tax system was based—was an inadequate measure of taxable capacity, and as a result 'the bulk of privately owned wealth [was] still concentrated in relatively few hands'. However, even in this short foreword Healey acknowledged that 'its impact on owners of wealth which forms part of our national heritage' must 'be weighed with particular care'.[15] The government knew that the impact on heritage assets would be one of the most serious issues presented by the wealth tax; it was the subject of extensive discussion within the Treasury in June, when the green paper was in preparation.[16] A House of Lords debate on 26 June brought these discussions to a public forum.[17] Healey knew that a failure to commit the government to considering heritage 'with particular care' in the green paper would receive a considerable backlash, particularly from the Lords. Exactly how this was to be done, however, remained unclear throughout 1972–75.

Country house owners and their supporters in the heritage sector feared that a wealth tax would result in the disintegration of collections and estates. Cornforth's report, and his statement above, gives some indication of the climate of fear surrounding the future of independently owned country houses that had developed by 1974. In December of that year, a Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed to examine the effectiveness and form of the proposed wealth tax.[18] This was the apex of the perception of a country house crisis, which was quietly considered to have been avoided by the end of the decade. If campaigners are to be believed, owners deeply felt a looming crisis: they were on the brink of losing their houses. However, we must look to the

[14] In June 1972 an article in *The Times* reported that a wealth tax would be 'one of the high priorities of the next Labour Government', see: 'Labour committed to tax on wealth', *Times* (29 Jun. 1972), p. 10. See also: R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987), p .66.
[15] *Parliamentary Papers* (1974), Cm 5704, 'Green Paper: Wealth Tax', p. 3.
[16] See: 'Wealth Tax and the National Heritage: implications of a Capital Transfer Tax', TNA, T 227/4063.
[17] See: Hansard, HL Deb 26 June 1974, vol 352, c1495–1585.
[18] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75), 36 (696–I), Select Committee on a Wealth Tax, Session 1974–75, Volume I.

wider context of contemporary architectural preservation to clarify the reality of the situation, and to ask what and who was truly threatened.

The political treatment of privately owned country houses during the seventies has received scant and conflicting historical assessment. In his *The Decline and Fall of the Aristocracy* (1990), Cannadine frequently conflated the waning fortunes of the aristocracy with those of their houses. As his title suggests, he did not believe that the 'crisis' of 1974 resulted in a more sympathetic political outlook towards privately owned heritage. Cannadine emphasised the mid-1950s to mid-1960s as a period of remarkable recovery for the British aristocracy and their houses, and yet described stately homes and their owners as 'among the most conspicuous lame ducks of Thatcherite Britain', implying that aristocratic houses lost relevance in correspondence with their owners.[19] He described the introduction of Capital Transfer Tax (CTT) in 1975 as 'the most elaborate attempt yet to block the loopholes in estate duty avoidance', in keeping with his overall narrative of the aristocracy's gradual decline into political and cultural irrelevance.[20] Cannadine's more recent assessment of the country house's situation since the seventies acknowledges the cultural significance of an increase in scholarly interest in country houses, and of the commercial success of houses that have been opened to the public, but reiterates his earlier emphasis on the connection between the (he argues, diminishing) influence of house owners and the expulsion of hereditary peers from the House of Lords.[21]

Peter Mandler has taken a contrasting view, and written of the country house's 'rise to prominence in and after 1974'. Mandler claimed that it was during the mid-seventies that 'the 'tradition' of the country house standing for England had been invented', as part of a reaction against urban modernism.[22] He has claimed that the concessions of the 1976 budget were evidence of an 'entirely different' government policy towards heritage property, formalising the country house's position as part of the national heritage.[23] This chapter supports neither argument entirely.

[19] Cannadine, *Decline and Fall*, p. 638.
[20] Ibid., p. 652.
[21] Idem, 'The British Country House Revisited' in D. Cannadine and J. Musson (eds), *The Country House: Past, Present, Future* (New York, 2018), p. 15.
[22] P. Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (London, 1997), pp. 401, 412.
[23] Ibid., p. 407.

The policy changes of 1975/76 set a crucial precedent for the special treatment of privately owned historic houses under taxation. However, the campaigns of 1973–76 had not invented a new conception of country houses' role in British history, and it is unclear that they substantially changed public opinion of the country house. Rather, they made it possible for those within the elected government and the civil service who already supported favourable tax exemptions to enact them covertly, because the campaigns ensured a temporary exemption from CTT that later became permanent.

This chapter will reassess the situation that private house owners faced in the early 1970s. It will consider how the HHA, which formed in November 1973, was so apparently successful in lobbying both Conservative and Labour governments during this decade. It will demonstrate the extent of personal networks that connected advocates for country houses as an invaluable part of national heritage and the political establishment. In doing so, it will demonstrate the pre-existing political power of private house owners, and how this power was mobilised against the proposal of a wealth tax. It will be argued that the apparent success of the country house lobby in "defeating" the threat to privately owned historic houses posed by the wealth tax was not due to a widespread and sudden change in attitude towards these houses—which did not occur on any large scale—but due to a combination of lobbyists' utilisation of existing sympathetic networks within government and a fluke of the bureaucratic process.

The Historic Houses Association and the Cornforth Report

The HHA was formed on 8 November 1973. The association was intended to represent the interests of private historic house owners politically, and to help them maintain and preserve their houses for future generations and 'the Nation'.[24] The HHA began with its infrastructure largely established, having developed directly from an advisory body to the BTA, the HHSC, which had

[24] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*, pp. 13, 113.

existed since February 1971.[25] The Standing Conference had developed from the Historic Houses Committee (HHC), which had been running within the BTA since 1965. The HHC continued to work alongside the HHA until July 1977, when it was replaced by a Heritage Committee with a wider remit, including museums and art galleries, to avoid the HHC and the HHA duplicating their efforts.[26]

Independence from the BTA, now a quango, was an important step in enabling owners to focus their efforts on political advocacy. In the first meeting of the HHA, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu stated that the HHSC provided 'too infrequent contact between owners, and more effective arrangements needed to be made'.[27] A more active organisation was necessary in order to fight the cause of privately owned heritage when a Labour government inevitably came to power. To this end, the HHA would have its own executive committee and secretariat. Montagu announced that owners must 'be prepared to help themselves if they wished others to assist them with their fiscal and other problems', and the HHA 'should be able to speak and act strongly and effectively on behalf of all owners who wished to support it'.[28]

As the founding Chairman of the HHA, Montagu significantly shaped its early form and priorities. As discussed in the previous chapter, Montagu was an early and vocal advocate for maintaining country houses through tourism. In November 1972, he held the second Historic Property Management course at Beaulieu, which advised members on navigating the fiscal framework relating to their houses.[29] His dynamism accounts for much of the HHA's early productivity. The HHA was a more commercial venture than the BTA in that it both marketed historic houses to visitors and marketed its services to the houses. In order for the HHA to be financially viable, it was essential that house owners were convinced of its utility. In pursuit of gaining more house members, the HHA was far more active and innovative than the HHC had

[25] 'Executive Committee Meeting Minutes', 8 Nov. 1973, Historic Houses Archives.
[26] British Tourist Authority, 'Annual Report of the British Tourist Authority for the Year Ended 31 March 1978' (London, 1978), pp. 34–35.
[27] 'Minutes of the Third Annual General Meeting - Standing Conference for Historic Houses', 8 Nov. 1973, Historic Houses Archives.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

the capacity to be during the 1960s. In his memoirs, Montagu recalled that his insistence on the importance of marketing caused some members to call into question his fitness to lead the HHA, as it made him appear 'too populist and a vulgariser'.[30] Nevertheless, promotion of private houses as touristic venues was central to the newly formed HHA's activities. While, from the inaugural meeting in 1973, it was not a requirement that owners opened to the public in order to become full members, house membership rates were scaled based on visitor numbers.[31] Houses that received more visitors paid more, because they received greater benefits from membership. To both potential house members and politicians, the HHA presented themselves as an organisation that helped owners who were already publicly seen to be helping themselves by making their houses commercially viable tourist attractions.

Despite a desire to be independent, the HHA relied on the BTA for resources in its first few years of operation. The BTA provided office space at 64 St James's Street, their head office, and the majority of the HHA's executive committee meetings were held in the board room there until the organisation moved to 10 Charles II Street, just around the corner.[32] David Coleman, a senior executive of the BTA, was seconded to the HHA and named the association's first Executive Secretary.[33] Later, he was replaced by Richard Miller, who left the BTA in November 1974 to become a permanent employee of the HHA in a role that would eventually be styled as Managing Director.[34] Now that the BTA was a government quango, the government was effectively bankrolling a lobby group through it (although none of the executive members of the HHA would have described it in those terms). This appears to have been overlooked by the government, perhaps because the new quango retained much of the independent character of the British Travel Association. Its chairman, Sir Alexander Glen, known for his Arctic expeditions,

[30] E. Montagu, *Wheels Within Wheels: An Unconventional Life* (London, 2000), p. 158.
[31] Scaled subscription rates ranged from £10 annually (for houses visited by fewer than 20,000 people annually) to £100 annually (visited by over 250,000 people). See: 'Minutes of the First Executive Committee Meeting, Historic Houses Association', 5 Dec. 1973, Historic Houses Archives, p. 2.
[32] Based on correspondence with Norman Hudson, and locations given in the HHA's early meeting minutes.
[33] 'Minutes of the Third Annual General Meeting – Standing Conference for Historic Houses', Historic Houses Archives, p. 3.
[34] 'Minutes of the First Annual General Meeting – Historic Houses Association', 8 Nov. 1973, Historic Houses Archives, p. 8.

did not have a background in government administration.[35] Glen recalled that the BTA was 'nearly unworkable' and 'a four-legged animal with no head' when he took charge.[36] Moreover, the historic houses contingent had become such an integral (and unquestioned) part of the BTA, that their attempts to influence the government were unlikely to be branded as lobbying by the BTA. Rather, the BTA saw itself as facilitating improvement of the tourist industry by enabling historic house owners to present their views on legislation to the government in a coherent format. The HHC had collaborated with the BTA's taxation sub-committee previously, and the very fact that this sub-committee existed normalised political representations on taxation from what outside observers may have seen as a special interest group: historic house owners.

The HHC commissioned John Cornforth's report on the condition of country house preservation in autumn 1972, and it was published in May 1974. The report was paid for largely by contributions from private historic house owners, and the BTA covered printing costs. The Department of the Environment (DOE) also contributed to the cost of the report, which had the particular support of Vivian Lipman, Director of Historic Buildings within the DOE.[37] As Cornforth wrote in his introduction, his invitation to conduct the survey reflected the reputation of *Country Life* magazine, his employers, and his ability to undertake it reflected the magazine's investment in country house preservation. In his words, 'for 77 years Country Life has been concerned with the country house and all that it stands for in our civilisation'.[38] Cornforth compiled a list of 'nearly 950' houses that he considered notable and therefore worth saving, and divided his report into two parts.[39] The first was an assessment of what had changed since the Gowers Report of 1950: the forms of ownership that had developed, and the effects of existing funding arrangements. The second part was more speculative and predicted the myriad ways in which the financial position of country houses might be undermined if they did not receive further exemptions from taxation. In the foreword, Hugh Wontner, the HHC's Chairman, observed that

[35] 'Sir Alexander Glen Obituary', *Times* (9 Mar. 2004), p. 23.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*, acknowledgements.
[38] Ibid., unpaginated.
[39] Ibid., p. 4.

the report had been commissioned at a time when the situation of private heritage seemed 'serious enough', but—two years later—the situation had 'become little short of desperate' for a number of owners.[40]

Cornforth warned against a 'punitive combination of existing and impending taxes' that would destabilise the current 'system of co-operation between private owners and the Government' via the HBCs.[41] As described in the previous chapter, conditions had gradually improved in key areas over the last twenty years for a large proportion of independent historic house owners. Better economic conditions, the enterprising activities of some owners in creating a 'stately home industry', and a system of government grants had combined to make maintenance of country houses more sustainable for many of those independent owners who were able to open their houses to the public. Cornforth's report acknowledged that government funding via the HBCs had contributed to the improved situation. On average, country houses (both publicly and privately owned) received a third of the available funding.[42] However, Cornforth argued that the government's grants could not offset a combination of the economic problems of mid-seventies Britain and a threatened wealth tax without significant exemptions for historic houses. Moreover, he identified the growth in public interest in historic building preservation as a potential problem for country houses, because the ordering of priorities 'could easily go awry', and country houses could cease to be valued in comparison to other types of building:

> In 1950 the great country houses were regarded as the most urgent problem by the small number of people who cared about such things. Now a great many more people are concerned with conservation, but country houses tend not to be their main interest: for them country houses are just part of the total problem of the rural and urban environment.[43]

Cornforth feared that the public's attention would be deflected from the 'country house problem' before it had been solved.

[40] Ibid., foreword.
[41] Ibid., p. 130.
[42] Ibid., p. 24.
[43] Ibid, preface.

By 1974, it was evident that an expansion of public ownership of country houses was unsustainable. Mark Girouard, Cornforth's predecessor as architectural editor of *Country Life*, claimed that country houses were 'probably in a more flourishing condition at the moment than they have been since before 1914. But all the signs are that the situation cannot last'.[44] The NT's Country Houses Scheme—which had previously been seen as a lifeline for the struggling privately owned country house—was only an option for very few owners. Between 1961 and 1973 the NT had acquired fifteen houses, compared to the thirty-three it had acquired between 1951 and 1960.[45] The NT and the NTS were the largest clients of the HBCs for England and Scotland respectively in the early seventies, demonstrating their inability to self-finance.[46] During the 1973/74 fiscal year, twenty-four per cent of the money offered by the HBC for Scotland in grants was directed towards country houses managed by the NTS, including the House of the Binns, Culzean Castle, and Leith Hall. All but one of these grants was an annual maintenance grant.[47] The NTS, like its counterpart in England, relied heavily on one-off grants for the maintenance of country houses in its care. Reflecting on the public cost of the houses that had passed into public and NT or NTS ownership, Cornforth argued that lowering taxes was 'a case of not taking a few hundreds of thousands of pounds a year from the owners rather than having to meet capital expenditure to the tune of £150–£250 million [to purchase historic houses] and having to meet all the bills after that'. Therefore, he believed the nation 'cannot afford to upset' the current system.[48]

HBCs dedicated a substantial portion of their funding to country houses consistently. Cornforth himself was a member of the HBC for England. During 1970, the year in which he joined, private owners of country houses received c.£1.85 million in grants, of a total £9 million awarded.[49] While Cornforth argued that this was not a high proportion, private owners regularly

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[44] Mark Girouard, 'Country House Crisis?', *Architectural Review,* 156 (Oct. 1974), p. 243.
[45] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*, p. 41.
[46] *Parl Pap.* (1973)*,* 11 (129), Historic Buildings Council for England, Nineteenth Report for the period 1 April 1971 to 31 March 1972, p. 9; *Parl Pap.* (1974/75), 11 (150), Historic Buildings Council for Scotland, Report for 1973–74, p. 6.
[47] *Parl Pap*. (1973), 11, appendix C.
[48] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*¸ p. 122.
[49] Ibid., p. 25; idem, *The Country Houses of England, 1948–1998* (London, 1998), p. xvi.

received the majority of funding awarded to country houses (despite the consistently high sums awarded to the NT and NTS). In 1973, this was £2.35 million of £5 million—again, of a total £9 million awarded by the HBC for England.[50] A significant portion of the HBC for England's staff were already campaigning on behalf of independently owned country houses, including the HHA's President, the Duke of Grafton, who had joined the HBC in 1969.[51] Their report for 1973–5 echoed Cornforth's personal views:

> If the financial and agricultural resources on which the maintenance of the building and amenity land depend are progressively diminished by a Wealth Tax and Capital Transfer Tax imposed on top of present levels of income tax, then owners will have no alternative but to try to sell their buildings or to allow them to fall into decay. Further, it would seem inevitable that, except in rare cases, the collections of furniture, paintings, etc., historically associated with the house would also be sold and dispersed, in many cases abroad.[52]

As the HBC reports demonstrate, country houses were already a top priority for conservation funding. Nevertheless, the money they received was widely considered to be inadequate when set against taxation.

While government funds were only granted in exchange for public access to historic properties, enabling public access increased conservation and maintenance costs. The maintenance of historic houses was (and is) a 'hugely expensive business', as detailed in the autobiography of Michael Saunders Watson, the owner of Rockingham Castle, who was heavily involved in the early activities of the HHA. He noted that heating and lighting costs were unsustainable without income tax relief, which was only available to houses that were classed as businesses (under Schedule D Case 1) in the early seventies; owners able to prove that their open house was 'managed on a commercial basis with a view to the realisation of profits' were able to set the cost of all repairs to that portion of the property used for the purposes of the trade against their gross trading income.[53] This was implemented in the 1952 Income Tax Act, which also

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[50] Idem, *Country Houses in Britain*, p. 25
[51] *Parl Pap*. (1970/71), 22 (258), Historic Buildings Council for England, Seventeenth Report for the period 1 January 1969 to 31 March 1970, p. 3.
[52] *Parl Pap*. (1975/76), 15 (316), Historic Buildings Council for England, Twenty-first report for the period 1 April 1973 to 31 March 1975, p. 578.
[53] See: Income Tax Act 1952, part V, 136-137, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1952/10/pdfs/ukpga_19520010_en.pdf (30 Apr. 2022); Charles W.

included tax rebates for expenditure on agricultural land.[54] However, gaining this tax status was not easy; it required owners to convince the Inland Revenue that their business was profitable, and few open houses were. In his 1974 report, Cornforth explained that one (unnamed) individual had told him that 'only about 20–25 houses achieve Case 1 status', but he believed that 'the number may well be considerably higher'.[55] Nevertheless, that number likely comprised a minority of open country houses.

Smaller houses that were open to the public, like Saunders Watson's own house, constantly risked losing their Case 1 status if they failed to demonstrate regular profit.[56] Also, repairs were more expensive for old properties, because of the scarcity of suitable materials and craftsmanship. When Value Added Tax (VAT) was introduced in 1973, repairs were subject to the standard rate of ten per cent.[57] Cornforth claimed that the introduction of VAT had 'wiped out' increases in income for many open houses, as owners paid the tax on income derived from visitors.[58] His report indicated the myriad difficulties of the relationship between funding and public access, and argued that the crux of the problem was that 'tax assessments have not been devised with any regard to the particular problems of country houses or the object of opening'.[59] Some houses simply did not attract enough visitors to turn a profit, because their 'strong points' were of a 'comparatively specialised nature', or because they were located in less-densely populated areas, away from major transport routes. Moreover, smaller houses might be unable to physically accommodate the number of visitors required to offset the costs of opening.[60] Consequently, one of the major conclusions of Cornforth's report was that tourism alone could not solve the country house's problems.[61]

N. Miles, *Running an Open House: A Guide to the Public Opening of Houses* (London, 1986), pp. 32-33.
[54] Income Tax Act 1952, part X, 313–4.
[55] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*, p. 86.
[56] Michael Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle* (Norfolk, 2008), p. 108.
[57] Nicholas Cooper, 'Country Houses and the Law' in R. Strong, J. Harris and M. Binney (eds), *The Destruction of the Country House* (London, 1974), pp. 182-183.
[58] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*, p. 85.
[59] Ibid., p. 87.
[60] Ibid., pp. 88-89.
[61] Ibid., p. 129.

Nevertheless, Labour and Conservative politicians alike had remained unwilling to support any tax concessions that might be seen to aid the rich in the early 1970s. During a debate on arrangements for tax relief on houses open to the public in July 1971, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Maurice Macmillan, voiced fears that were widely felt among both the Heath and Wilson governments. He argued that it would be difficult to confine taxpayers' help to the purpose of preserving property and preserving historic houses. Those who were 'well able to maintain [their houses] without assistance' may also benefit from additional relief on funds intended to maintain historic houses, and therefore such a policy risked functioning as a tax avoidance scheme for the rich.[62] Macmillan was a Conservative MP, educated at Eton and Oxford, with familial connections to the Chatsworth Estate. Even someone from the same social background as country house owners could not be relied upon as an ally in government when it came to tax policy.

After the February 1974 general election, tax reliefs for country house owners seemed even more unattainable. Harold Wilson's Labour government had pledged to bring about 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families'.[63] The Green Paper on the wealth tax, published by the government in August 1974, was explicit in voicing the government's intention to address the question of how to maintain privately owned historic houses without favouring the wealthy:

> The Government recognise the danger that the wealth tax could lead to the dispersal of the national heritage: they intend to ensure that this does not happen and that instead our heritage becomes more readily available to the public generally. Accordingly any special arrangements which are made for historic houses or works of art etc. should be conditional on the house being open to the public or the work of art etc. being on public display, whether in the owner's house or on loan to a public collection, with such modifications as might be appropriate for delicate objects or research material.[64]

This statement was simple enough in principle, but the government's reluctance to suggest what these 'special arrangements' might be reflected the complexity of the situation. The direct repercussions of the taxation arrangements for privately owned historic houses on public art

[62] Hansard, HC Deb 6 July 1971, vol 820, c1190.
[63] 'Let us work together – Labour's way out of the crisis', Labour Party 1974 manifesto, https://web.archive.org/web/20150924123940/http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lab74feb.htm (14 Mar. 2022).
[64] *Parl Pap.* (1974), Cm 5704, p. 12.

collections were widely discussed in the summer of 1974.[65] In July, Robert Neild, a left-leaning Professor of Economics at Cambridge University, wrote of the proposed wealth and gift taxes in the *New Statesman*:

> What one faces is a problem of 'social engineering'—how to rearrange the ownership and display of the national art heritage to the maximum social advantage. The obvious answer is to arrange that country houses … are turned on a much larger scale into museums and places of showmanship while they and their contents pass from private to public ownership…[66]

Neild suggested that historic house owners pay taxes via artworks, which the government permitted to remain *in situ* in return for public access. This was an extension of the existing acceptance-in-lieu arrangements, which—as Cornforth outlined in his report—still presented the problem of financing access to collections.[67] As a result of rises in wages and insurance costs, the owners Cornforth interviewed faced a proportionately higher cost of opening than they had in the 1950s, and therefore an ever-closing gap between expenditure and income.[68] In August, the *Guardian*, another newspaper disinclined to champion inherited wealth, argued that the mere act of proposing the taxes could force the government to prematurely 'reassess the whole basis of public patronage and conserving the nation's artistic wealth', as they faced a backlash from the art world.[69] One point of apparently unanimous agreement during these discussions was that the government should aim to 'limit the flow abroad of works of art'.[70] Whether the mere presence of 'important' artworks within Britain was sufficient to constitute public benefit was a more socially divisive matter.

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[65] Discussion focused particularly on the difficulties of making accurate valuations of works of art. See: "This would stem the flow to major public collections – the National Gallery acquired some two thirds of its pictures by gift or bequest", *Arts Guardian* (16 Aug. 1974), p. 8.
[66] Robert Neild, 'Tax, Land, and Art Treasures', *New Statesman,* 88/2259 (12 Jul. 1974), p. 37 col. a.
[67] Cornforth, *Country Houses in Britain*¸ pp. 87-91.
[68] Ibid.¸ p. 88.
[69] "This would stem the flow to major public collections".
[70] Ibid.

‘A hell fire sermon for the unconverted’: *The Destruction of the Country House* exhibition

In the months preceding the appointment of the Select Committee, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) planned and staged an exhibition entitled *The Destruction of the Country House*. It ran in London from October to December 1974, before a brief regional tour, and was conceived by Roy Strong, the newly appointed Director of the Museum. John Harris, Curator of the RIBA’s drawings collection, approached Strong with the idea of collaborating to communicate the findings of Cornforth’s report to the public.[71] From the beginning, Strong intended the exhibition to be a ‘shock show’, to warn the public of the huge danger that he felt loomed over ‘everything which we now categorise as ‘heritage’’.[72] Strong has claimed that *Destruction* ‘really changed public opinion and changed government opinion’.[73] It was a major component in the country house lobby’s attempts to shift the focus away from owners—the ‘custodians’ of the national heritage—and towards houses as representative of a shared national past.

Although pleading the cause of aristocrats, the exhibition was organised by, and appealed to, the middle classes. Roy Strong and John Harris, who co-curated the exhibition alongside Marcus Binney, were both from relatively modest backgrounds; Strong was self-described “lower-middle class” and Harris, the son of an upholsterer, left school at fourteen.[74] Strong presented his motivation in staging the exhibition as a determination to protect ‘England and its traditions’ by defending what he saw as England’s ‘greatest contribution to the visual arts’. In an internal memo to Peter Thornton at the V&A, Harris wrote that the organisers of the *Destruction* exhibition must avoid conveying ‘an impression (false or otherwise) that we are advocating the return to a way of life that is now defunct and unacceptable’.[75] It was necessary for Harris to warn against this risk, because the exhibition was so overt in its political aims of winning greater taxation concessions for private house owners. Indeed, Strong recalled that he ‘placed a press

[71] Interview with Roy Strong, conducted by Elena Porter, The Laskett, 13 Feb. 2019; in the author’s possession.
[72] Roy Strong, *The Roy Strong Diaries* (London, 1997), pp. 121–128.
[73] *When Lucy Met Roy: Sir Roy Strong at 80*, dir. Basil Comely (TV programme, 2015).
[74] Ibid.
[75] Memo from John Harris to Peter Thornton, undated, VAM, MA/28/243/1.

embargo on the opening dinner … [because he] feared the newspapers caricaturing rich country-house owners quaffing champagne while the museum pleaded their cause'.[76]

The initial concept design for the V&A's exhibition by Simon Jervis, who worked in the V&A's Furniture and Woodwork Department, provides a greater sense of its polemical purpose. Jervis employed the metaphor of a church and divided the exhibition into sections on the past (narthex), present (nave), and future (choir). This metaphor reflected the organisers' belief in the solemnity of the situation that the exhibition was intended to communicate, and their desire to "convert" visitors with an emotive display that would galvanise them to join in a campaign for country house preservation. The hall of the past, known as the "hall of destruction" was to have 'bleak gloomy deadpan' presentation—to function as 'a hell fire sermon for the unconverted'.[77] In here, John Harris' voice relayed a list of destroyed historic houses while, as the *Observer* described it, 'the ear is bombarded with the heart-rending roar of a demolition team in action', and images of the lost houses lined the walls.[78] The 'present' section presented 'basic facts' of the precarious economic position of these houses, and finally the 'future' section functioned as a 'rallying call' to visitors who had been converted to the cause, listing the possible solutions and ways in which visitors could personally contribute. The exhibition and its associated publication and television show were intended to make the viewer feel that they had personally lost something: with each destroyed house, a piece of their history and culture was destroyed. The leaflet accompanying the travelling exhibition claimed that 'in a sense the historic houses of this country belong to everybody, or at least everybody who cares about this country and its traditions'.[79] Strong certainly felt that he had convinced his audience of this. As he recalled in his diary, 'Many was a time I stood in that exhibition watching tears stream down the visitors' faces as they battled to come to terms with all that had gone'.[80] Sherie Naidoo, who later became a Public Affairs Consultant for the National Heritage Memorial Fund, was inspired to work in the

[76] Strong, *The Roy Strong Diaries*, p. 140.
[77] Hand-drawn and -annotated sketch of the exhibition layout by Simon Jervis, VAM, MA/28/243/1.
[78] 'Briefing: Demolition', *Observer* (13 Oct. 1974), p. 25.
[79] *The Destruction of the Country House* travelling exhibition leaflet, VAM, MA/29/184/5.
[80] Strong, *The Roy Strong Diaries*, p. 140.

heritage sector by a visit to the exhibition. Naidoo remembers feeling that *Destruction* gave visitors a new perspective on country houses, demonstrating that there was 'something more to them than playgrounds of the rich'.[81]

The accompanying collection of essays produced to coincide with the exhibition placed owners firmly at the centre of possible solutions to the ongoing destruction. It included contributions from a range of house owners, architectural writers, and curators, prompting Strong to claim that 'Never, in any other country, have the views of so many from so many varied angles been placed between two boards for the general reader'.[82] Of course, while the angles were slightly different, the argument was the same: the continued attachment of a family to their house was vital. The Duke of Bedford wrote of the 'hundreds and hundreds of letters from people of all walks of life' praising his handling of Woburn that he had received since he had handed over the estate to his son. He felt that 'sometimes the government is not entirely in touch with the millions of people who are deeply appreciative of our great houses and their traditions and do not wish to see them dispersed in the ostensible interests of socialism'.[83] Lord Brooke, of Warwick Castle, added that 'it is not really funny when those who are struggling with the problems of maintaining much of our great architecture are caricatured as coroneted and berobed clowns pocketing ten-penny pieces'.[84]

There was extensive press coverage of the exhibition and accompanying book, most of it positive. As Ruth Adams has noted, Strong courted sympathetic newspapers to produce favourable coverage of the exhibition.[85] Andrew Dempsey, Keeper of the V&A's Public Relations Department, assured the British Tourist Authority of extensive positive coverage, including four articles in the *Telegraph Magazine*; a front-page article in the *Sunday Times*' weekly review

[81] Sherie Naidoo, in conversation with the author on 28 Apr. 2022.
[82] R. Strong, M. Binney, and J. Harris, *The Destruction of the Country House, 1875–1975* (London, 1974), p. 6.
[83] Duke of Bedford, 'Woburn Abbey' in Strong, Binney, and Harris (eds), *The Destruction of the Country House*, pp. 163.
[84] Lord Brooke, 'Warwick Castle' in Strong, Binney, and Harris (eds), *The Destruction of the Country House*, p. 164.
[85] R. Adams, 'The V&A, the Destruction of the Country House and the Creation of 'English Heritage'', *Museum & Society*, 11/1 (2013), p. 8.

section, in which the exhibition was described as 'fascinating yet doleful, even macabre'; and various coverage across the *Times*, *Apollo*, *Country Life*, the *Burlington Magazine* and other magazines.[86] Commenting on the book in the *Spectator,* Magnus Magnusson wrote that it was not 'a book so much as a bludgeon', and that it was impossible for a reader 'not to feel dismay at the scale of destruction'. However, he opposed what he described as the book's central argument, 'that the country house should be preserved in amber, landed gentry and all' and 'the idea that without the family living in it, and living off its estates, it is no longer a truly functioning country house'.[87] Magnusson suggested that country houses should learn from the contemporary experience of preserving industrial heritage: not everything could be kept, so the individual enthusiasm and dynamism of local groups of preservationists decided what was preserved. Other criticism was similarly restrained, with the exception of a self-described 'dissident voice' in the *Observer,* who commented that the exhibition 'tries to do for the privileged what Chairman Mao did for the people' in the form of 'a pretty dull show, composed primarily of photographs'.[88] There was more sincere criticism in Caroline Tisdall's review in the *Guardian*, which deemed the show 'garrulous hysteria'.[89] Tisdall regularly wrote *Guardian* features on country houses, and the article prompted strong responses from Harris and Binney, and a few outraged supporters. One such response was from a teenaged James Stourton, who told the *Guardian's* editor that Tisdall was 'determined to confuse the preservation of England's greatest country houses with the preservation of their owners' standards of living'.[90] Stourton, the son of Charles Stourton, holder of three baronetcies and owner of Allerton Castle in Yorkshire, was not the most impartial of critics. Privately, Strong confessed that he was 'very pleased about [Tisdall's] hostile review … [t]here is nothing like that for bringing people in and arousing public opinion and support'.[91]

[86] Letter from Andrew Dempsey to D. A. Webb, 23 Jul. 1974, Beaulieu, Box. 159; 'Watch it all come down', *Sunday Times* (6 Oct. 1974), p. 31.
[87] 'Kept in amber?', *Spectator* (16 Nov. 1974), p. 633.
[88] 'Briefing: Demolition'.
[89] 'Englishmen's castles: Caroline Tisdall at the Victoria and Albert for "The Destruction of the English Country House", *Guardian* (9 Oct. 1974), p. 12.
[90] 'Letters to the Editor: In the wake of the greedy bulldozer', *Guardian* (14 Oct. 1974), p. 12.
[91] Letter from Roy Strong to Pamela Johnson, 21 Oct. 1974, VAM, MA/28/243/1.

The results of all this coverage were impressive. The exhibition attracted overwhelming visitor numbers, and its offshoots had a wide reach. The V&A recorded a final attendance figure of 42,555 paying visitors.[92] In an HHA executive committee meeting on 15 January 1975, Richard Miller, the Executive Secretary, reported that 'the recently transmitted BBC2 film "Gone, going, going" had achieved the highest ever audience figure for a documentary programme on BBC2, no less than 3,300,000 viewers'.[93] The programme opened with Strong standing before a wall of photographs of country houses, lamenting the 'hurricane of destruction' in the last century and informing visitors that 'every one of these houses, fifteen thousand in all, have been demolished ... Now there's only a thousand left'.[94] Although the effects of the public support that the exhibition produced are difficult to ascertain, it is evident that the show facilitated greater collaboration between heritage organisations. Jamie Stormonth Darling, Director of the NTS, wrote to Strong to inform him of how 'deeply inspired' he had been by the exhibition, commenting, 'thank goodness you are where you are and can help to lead, enlighten and inspire'.[95] Upon exiting the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to join a wide variety of heritage organisations, including the HHA, The NT, The National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS), the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Victorian Society.[96] When these organisations met to discuss a joint approach to protesting the wealth tax, they agreed that it was better to maintain communication but make separate cases to the government.[97] They were united in opposition, but for different reasons. The HHA were not directly involved in the initial organisation of *Destruction,* but were part of this wider group of organisations that supported the exhibition. After the exhibition had closed in London, the Association helped to organise a regional tour, which first went to Cardiff, then Dundee,

[92] 'BTA: Agenda of the 14th Meeting of the Historic Houses Committee', 9 Jan. 1975, Beaulieu, Box 160, p. 1.
[93] 'Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 15 Jan 1975', Historic Houses Archives, p. 2.
[94] *Gone, Going, Going*, prod. David Cheshire (TV programme, 1975).
[95] Letter from Jamie Stormonth Darling to Roy Strong, 28 Oct. 1974, VAM, MA/28/243/1.
[96] Exhibition layout plans, VAM, MA/29/184/5.
[97] 'British Tourist Authority: Historic Houses Committee: Minutes of the 13th meeting held in the Committee Room, Victoria and Albert Museum', 8 Oct. 1974, Beaulieu, Box 160, p. 2.

Aberdeen, Doncaster, Bolton, Birmingham and Leicester.[98] The Keeper of Public Relations at the V&A, Andrew Dempsey, attended a BTA meeting to determine the details of distribution and promotion of the Cornforth report, alongside Lord Montagu, George Howard, Marcus Binney and Cornforth himself.[99] The report was subsequently sold at the exhibition. *Destruction* acted as a focal point for individuals and organisations that were keen to warn the public and government of the threat posed by the wealth tax, enabling them to position a threat to country houses as a national crisis in the arts.

Despite this success, the HHA had to act carefully in order to cultivate the image of country house owners as struggling, unpaid curators. Shortly after the exhibition opened, Cornforth warned Montagu that 'as things have changed so rapidly, the HHA in its present state is likely to stir up anti-owner feeling rather than the reverse, and it is certainly not a body around which people will rally'.[100] Cornforth appeared to be concerned that the HHA would be perceived as a collection of whining and entitled aristocrats who were, fundamentally, rich. He encouraged Montagu to take a step back from the press, rather than open up the HHA to further scrutiny in an imminent press conference. Several weeks earlier, the Duke of Grafton had been the subject of a hostile *Daily Mirror* feature. He had complained to his interviewer that many aristocrats were living 'in the most dreadful, the most appalling discomfort'. However, he had failed to convince them of his personal hardships during their discussion at Euston Hall, where the pair had been sipping sherry, surrounded by Van Dyck, Stubbs, and Reynolds paintings.[101] There may have been more British people who considered themselves admirers of country houses in 1974 than there had been in 1950, but there were no fewer critics of aristocrats who asked for public money to maintain their houses.

Ultimately, supporters of privately owned country houses did not need to eliminate all opposition in order to win political concessions; they merely needed to overwhelm that opposition

[98] 'Destruction of the Country House: Travelling Version, Provisional Tour 1975–76', VAM, MA/29/184/4.
[99] 'British Tourist Authority: Note of meeting to discuss publication and publicity for the report "Country Houses in Britain – Can they survive?" (Mr. John Cornforth)', Beaulieu, Box 159.
[100] Letter from John Cornforth to Edward Montagu, 15 Oct. 1974, Beaulieu, Box 159.
[101] 'Who are the rich?', *Daily Mirror* (1 Oct. 1974), p. 15.

with vocal supporters. The *Destruction* exhibition was a crucial vehicle in this process, facilitating the amalgamation of the "country house lobby" and the rest of the heritage sector. In 1974, the "country house issue" became inseparable from the wider concept of protecting British heritage in public discussions surrounding the exhibition. Marcus Binney's extensive involvement in the exhibition is perhaps the clearest example of this. In 1975, Binney, one of the creators of the *Destruction* exhibition, founded SAVE Britain's Heritage (SAVE), which campaigned for the preservation of a wide range of built heritage, including country houses alongside urban buildings. It focused on publicity, drawing the plights of individual buildings to the public's attention. Peter Mandler has argued that SAVE 'made the country-house issue 'safe' for a younger generation of environmental campaigners unimpressed by squirearchy'.[102] They were essential allies for country house lobbyists, providing a relatively neutral front for the promotion of individual endangered buildings. In his autobiography, which details his extensive involvement in the HHA during these years, Michael Saunders Watson described SAVE as 'the shock troops of the heritage campaign, while the HHA and the amenity societies were the infantry'.[103]

Mobilising the believers: utilising personal and political networks

The HHA quickly became highly effective as 'infantry': the organisation was soon well-connected with other heritage organisations and government ministers. They utilised their existing connections within government to became part of a wider movement to protect privately owned heritage assets from a wealth tax. The greatest success of this movement was subsuming the cause of tax relief for historic house owners within a wider concern for 'national heritage' in general, giving campaigns against the wealth tax a gloss of wider social and cultural relevance.

This flurry of political agitation on behalf of country houses took place during a time when the preservation of historic buildings was garnering widespread attention, particularly in

[102] Mandler, *Fall and Rise*, p. 406.
[103] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle,* p. 95.

the context of urban heritage. John Delafons, who had been a senior civil servant at the Department of the Environment, has claimed that 1975, as European Architectural Heritage Year (EAHY), 'was perhaps the beginning of the populist concern for conservation which increasingly supplanted the elitist tradition of conservation in Britain'.[104] The focus of the initiative was 'everyday' urban heritage, as highlighted in the Declaration and Charter produced by the 1975 EAHY conference in Amsterdam.[105] The allocation of the UK's EAHY budget reflected this theme. Existing conservation areas such as Chester, Poole, and the Georgian New Town of Edinburgh were granted additional funds, as was the Scottish NT's "Little Houses" scheme.[106] There was also a scheme of small grants to save often-overlooked objects of heritage such as road signs and letterboxes, emphasising the focus on the everyday heritage of ordinary people. In this climate, a campaign focused on conserving the houses of historical elites was an unlikely candidate for support.

Many of the new heritage schemes in the mid-1970s had a class dimension: carrying the message that the historic environments of the poor should not be treated as lesser than those of the wealthy. This message was evident in a book entitled *The Rape of Britain*, published in 1975 and authored by Colin Amery and Dan Cruickshank, who were both committee members of SAVE Britain's Heritage. They harnessed the attention on urban heritage generated by EAHY to alert the government and public to ongoing, widespread destruction of urban environments across Britain.[107] In his foreword, John Betjeman wrote that the book demonstrated 'the importance of the modest old buildings which act as foils to greater ones'.[108] The book chronicled the effects of unsympathetic urban planning in towns across Britain, invoking the provocative metaphor of 'rape' to instil a sense of national degradation and urgency. Country houses were competing for

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[104] J. Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882-1996* (London, 1997), p.110.
[105] Glendinning*, The Conservation Movement*, p.406.
[106] HMSO (DOE), *What is our Heritage?: United Kingdom Achievements for European Architectural Heritage Year 1975: Photographs of Restorations and Improvements done between 1972 and 1975* (London, 1975).
[107] S. Andreae, 'From comprehensive development to Conservation Areas', in M. Hunter (ed), *Preserving the Past: The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain* (Stroud, 1996), p.144.
[108] Colin Amery and Dan Cruickshank, *The Rape of Britain* (London, 1975), p.7.

attention among many other categories of built heritage that were similarly portrayed as on the brink of collapse.

A petition organised by the HHA in early 1975, in collaboration with NADFAS, produced quantifiable evidence of popular support. The petition was always referred to by its organisers as the 'petition against the wealth tax'. However, the HHA took pains to ensure that it was framed as supporting houses rather than their owners. During their Executive Committee meeting of 15 January 1975, it was agreed 'that there should be no direct reference to the Wealth Tax', and that the wording should be as open as possible, to include the possibility that the National Trust (NT) and National Trust for Scotland (NTS) would use the petition in their properties, which they did.[109] The petition read:

> We, the signatories to this Petition, being deeply concerned at the threat to Historic Houses and their Works of Art, to Gardens and Landscapes and to Private Museums as the unintended but inevitable result of existing and proposed taxes, urge this honourable House so to frame legislation that this cherished part of our heritage can survive for the pleasure and enlightenment of present and future generations, and your petitioners as in duty bound will ever humbly pray.[110]

Visitors of many open HHA member houses were asked to sign, and in several regions NADFAS members—mostly middle-class women who volunteered their time—administered a house's section of the petition. While not reaching the 15,000,000 names that the HHA had originally hoped for, it was one of the largest petitions ever presented to parliament, at 1,116,253 signatures.[111] It was presented on 5 December 1975 by the Labour MP for Edmonton, Ted Graham.[112] This was a deliberate tactic of the HHA; at their 1975 AGM, Montagu stated that the petition would 'probably' be presented 'by a Labour M.P.'.[113] Simultaneously, the HHA ensured

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[109] 'Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 15 January 1975', Historic Houses Archives, p. 4; 'Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 19 March 1975', Historic Houses Archives, p. 3.
[110] Copy of the wealth tax petition, Castle Howard, Tax File: Jan-Feb 1975, incl. wealth tax, CLA tax etc.
[111] 'Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 18 September 1974', Historic Houses Archives, p.4.
N.B. The HHA claimed that it was *the* largest petition ever presented, but it did not exceed conservative estimates of the signatures achieved on the 1848 Chartist petition. According to the UK's Parliamentary Archives (private correspondence), original petitions were routinely destroyed before 1946, and therefore it is impossible to verify pre-1946 signatory numbers.
[112] Hansard, HC Deb 5 Dec 1975, vol 901, c2075.
[113] 'Minutes of the Second Annual General Meeting of the Historic Houses Association', 9 Nov. 1972, Historic Houses Archives, p. 1.

that the social and professional circles who were expected to support the petition had an opportunity to sign it; it was sent to all members of the British Antique Dealers' Association and 'all the Clubs in London', which probably brought it to the attention of many MPs.[114]

The NT proved to be amenable allies to the HHA, largely due to the NT's inability to take on more country houses without significant endowments. In the House of Lords debate on the possible consequences of the wealth tax for historic houses in June 1974, Viscount Norwich, as a member of the Executive Committee and the Properties Committee of the NT, stated that the Trust had always thought of itself as 'merely a lifeline' for country houses:

> We have always believed, and we know we are right, that the only real way to protect and preserve a country house is to enable it to continue in private ownership, and ideally in the ownership of the family to whom it has traditionally belonged.[115]

It was in both the NT's and NTS's interests to advocate greater government support of private ownership historic properties, and they demonstrated this by attending and participating in the HHA's Executive Committee meetings. In doing so, they remained consistent with the support for financial concessions for private owners that they had demonstrated since the 1950s. In November 1973, the Executive Committee included fifteen voting members, and three permanent members representing the NT, NTS, and Department of the Environment. Subsequent Executive Committee meeting minutes show that these representatives were consistently present and contributing; the HHA kept these important organisations and a government representative informed of their activities, providing opportunities for them to be involved where appropriate. This continued involvement of the NT and NTS in the HHA's activities indicates that the alliance was mutually beneficial.

The HHA executives were careful in their attempts to maintain a cross-party image, hoping that the Association would be viewed as politically neutral like the NT. However, their members were instinctively suspicious of the Labour government. When Michael Culme-Seymour decided to give Rockingham Castle to his nephew, Michael Saunders Watson, in 1967,

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[114] 'Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 21 May 1975', Historic Houses Archives, p.5.
[115] HL Deb 26 June 1974, vol 352, cc1495–1585.

he had cited fear of the changes that would be made by 'the present Labour government, with Roy Jenkins as Chancellor' as his primary reason for giving up the house while he was still relatively young.[116] Jenkins may have been feared by historic house owners for his apparent commitment to forcing greater equality initially, but by the mid-1970s he was embedded within their social sphere. Jennifer Jenkins, Roy's wife, became Chairman of the HBC for England in 1975, when her husband was Home Secretary. The Jenkinses stayed overnight at Rockingham Castle on their way to the Labour party conference of 1976.[117] Support for the cause of independently owned country houses during Jenkins' chairmanship is evident in the HBC's statement that it was 'gravely concerned at the effects of the severe decline in private financial resources available for the running and repair of historic buildings' presented by the wealth tax.[118] This was listed alongside funding cuts for publicly owned built heritage as one of the main concerns that required the government's attention. Roy Jenkins' successor as Chancellor, Denis Healey, showed himself to be sympathetic to Michael Saunders Watson's concerns about the effects of capital taxes on Rockingham Castle. Saunders Watson had strategically invited the (Labour) Corby Council to an estate walk on the day before Healey was due to meet with them for lunch. When Saunders Watson met Healey at a local Labour rally the next day, the Chancellor commented that he had 'clearly brainwashed the local mayor as he had had nothing but Rockingham and its problems throughout the lunch'.[119] Healey told Saunders Watson that he would be happy to 'look at a workable scheme for a supporting fund which would not be open to abuse'. Commenting on the encounter in a letter to George Howard, Saunders Watson noted that he had 'always been under the impression that it is the Treasury who are the chief obstacles to [a maintenance fund]'.[120] Winning government allies in private was not difficult; the real challenge

[116] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 1. In the event, Denis Healey was made Chancellor when Labour returned to power in 1974.
[117] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 113.
[118] *Parl Pap.* (1976/77), 13 (5), Historic Buildings Council for England, Twenty-second report for the period 1 April 1975 to 31 March 1976, p. 9.
[119] Letter from Michael Saunders Watson to George Howard, 12 May 1975, Castle Howard, 'HHA Wealth Tax 1975; Sandford Report on Wealth Tax; HHA Rating Survey', 'Wealth Tax, May 1975 – incl. Joint Committee Tax; CLA; Petition; HHA etc.'.
[120] Ibid.

was winning government allies who were willing to oppose the Treasury and publicly align themselves with the country house lobby.

The HHA struggled to gain a group of allies within the Labour Party who were both influential and willing to be vocal in their support. Conservative MP Patrick Cormack and Hugh Leggatt, an art dealer, organised an all-party parliamentary group for arts and heritage in the summer of 1974. Their purpose was to convince MPs of the dangers posed to heritage by CTT and the wealth tax, but—given that membership of the group was based on interest—they were largely preaching to a small assembly of the converted. The group was chaired by Ted Graham, the Labour MP who later presented the wealth tax petition to parliament. When Roy Strong went to address the group, he commented in his diary that they 'are such fringe people with no real influence up the line', and wrote of Graham, 'From the moment you see him you know he probably wouldn't be able to tell a Rembrandt from a Picasso'.[121] Whether or not others shared Strong's opinion, the group was not a particularly effective vehicle for change.

The HHA's most valuable ally in the Commons at this time was Robert (Robin) Cooke, a Conservative MP and owner of Athelhampton Hall, a fifteenth-century country house in Dorset. He was a member of the HHA's first executive committee and the all-party parliamentary group. Cooke's parliamentary record demonstrates wide-ranging interest in heritage and environmental issues, and his defence of privately owned historic houses was couched in a much broader defence of the arts, particularly in defending regional access to arts funding.[122] He was also a member of the Select Committee on the Wealth Tax, providing a sympathetic ear for the HHA's presentations to the Committee throughout 1974–5.[123] When reporting on the experience of giving evidence to the Committee during the HHA's 1975 AGM, Saunders Watson emphasised the 'great debt of gratitude' that the HHA owed Cooke, who had taken the chair during that particular Committee meeting.[124]

[121] R. Strong, *The Roy Strong Diaries 1967–1978* (London, 1997), p. 151.
[122] For example, Hansard, HC Deb 13 April 1972, vol 834, cc1412–4
[123] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75)*,* 36, p. vii; Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p.106-9.
[124] 'Minutes of the Second Annual General Meeting of the Historic Houses Association', pp. 5-6.

As Chairman of the HHA's and BTA's joint taxation sub-committee, Saunders Watson 'spent many hours' in the House of Lords, which was made possible by use of Cooke's office.[125] He was accompanied by Jeremy Benson, who had founded the Joint Committee of National Amenity Societies in 1972.[126] The purpose of the Joint Committee was to coordinate strategic action among the societies that the government had appointed to advise on applications to demolish listed buildings in 1968.[127] Saunders Watson's memoirs reveal that he and Benson made precise recommendations to MPs. As they gained each others' and the politicians' trust, they worked together more closely:

> With Oliver Stanley's help I drafted a number of amendments and new clauses to the Finance Bill.[128] Each had to be accompanied by a brief to which the tabling MP could speak if necessary. Jeremy prepared his own on this occasion as he wished to keep his distance from the owners' organisations. Later on as our credentials became more widely known and trusted Jeremy and I were able to combine our efforts under the same hat…[129]

Labour politician Tam Dalyell, who had a family seat in West Lothian, later wrote of Saunders Watson and Benson that 'by dogged and informed persistence, with a lacing of charm and humour [they] transformed political and fiscal attitudes to the treatment of heritage'.[130]

A potential wealth tax was fraught with difficulties for the Treasury and the government. The Select Committee charged with considering the application and implications of the tax was established on 12 December 1974. It was composed of twenty-one members from across the political spectrum, and membership changed rapidly: nine members were replaced within the Committee's first six months.[131] Hugh Jenkins, then the Arts Minister, later commented that '[i]f

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[125] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p.109.
[126] Members have varied throughout the years, but they originally included The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; The Ancient Monuments Society; The Georgian Group; The Victorian Society and The Civic Trust. See: Letter from Jeremy Benson to Leonard Beighton, 16 Jun. 1980, Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 16, Tax 1975–80.
[127] 'Memorandum submitted by the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies', https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmselect/cmcumeds/506/9061605.htm (accessed 20 Aug. 2021).
[128] Oliver Stanley provided the CLA with tax advice. See: Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 106.
[129] Ibid., p. 108.
[130] Ibid., p. viii.
[131] These included Guy Barnett, Labour MP for Greenwich; Jeremy Bray, Labour MP for Motherwell and Wishaw (Scotland); Ray Carter, Labour MP for Birmingham Northfield; William Clark, Conservative MP for East Surrey; Robert Cooke, Conservative MP for Bristol West; Tam Dalyell, Labour MP for West Lothian (Scotland); Denzil Davies, Labour MP for Llanelli (Wales); Ian Gow, Conservative MP for Eastbourne; John Hall, Conservative MP for Wycombe; Paul Hawkins, Conservative MP for South West

the Committee had been chosen to ensure that there was no wealth tax its membership could not have been better selected'.[132] The tax's implication for heritage assets was one issue in a long list of its potential unintended detrimental effects, but heritage was given extensive consideration in the Committee's deliberations. The issue was given additional weight because the government had decided to wait for the Committee's comments before deciding how Capital Transfer Tax, newly introduced in the 1975 Finance Act, would apply to historic properties and their contents.

Capital Transfer Tax (CTT) replaced Estate Duty in 1975, and also applied to transfers of property (or any capital assets) in the owner's lifetime. The existing exemptions for historic chattels under death duties were incorporated into CTT, and—crucially—extended to cover houses, gardens, and amenity land, subject to access and maintenance requirements. While awaiting news on the wealth tax, private historic house owners were therefore better off under CTT than they had been under Estate Duty. This was the kind of arrangement that historic house owners had been lobbying for, but they were unable to rejoice in its achievement. These exemptions were described as a temporary arrangement, 'to avoid liability of national heritage properties until a decision is taken in the light of the report of the Select Committee on the Wealth Tax', and house owners fully expected their benefits to be wiped out by an annual wealth tax.[133] As George Howard had told the HHA on 22 October 1974, 'it is not the form of taxation which matters; it is its total weight'.[134] Despite the government's unwillingness to commit to the new exemptions in 1975, their temporary introduction later made permanent enactment easy and relatively inconspicuous.

Norfolk; John Horam, Labour MP for Gateshead West; Douglas Jay, Labour MP for Battersea North; Maurice Macmillan, Conservative MP for Farnham and son of Harold Macmillan and Lady Dorothy Cavendish (who grew up in Chatsworth); Robert McCrindle, MP for Brentwood and Ongar (Essex); Millie Miller, Labour MP for Ilford North; John Nott, Conservative MP for St Ives (Cornwall) who had been Minister of State at the Treasury under Heath; John Pardoe, Liberal MP for Cornwall North; Colin Phipps, Labour MP for Dudley West; John Roper, Labour Co-op MP for Farnworth; Timothy Sainsbury, Conservative MP for Hove; and Brian Walden, right-wing Labour MP for Birmingham Ladywood. *Parl Pap.* (1974/75)*,* 36, pp. ii-iii; all career information via 'UK Parliament: MPs and Lords', https://members.parliament.uk/.

[132] Hugh Jenkins, *The Culture Gap: An Experience of Government and the Arts* (London, 1979), p. 148.

[133] Hansard, HC Deb 5 March 1975, vol 887 c1531.

[134] 'G. Howard speech, 22 Oct 1974', Castle Howard, BTA: Historic Houses Committee 1973-1974, p. 12.

The issue of protecting the nation's heritage dominated much of the Select Committee's discussions. When Prince Philip was due to appear on television to discuss the future of stately homes in July 1975, in his capacity as British President of EAHY, the Inland Revenue rushed to inform Buckingham Palace of the political dangers that would be raised if he were to voice his view that historic houses ought to be exempted from a wealth tax—as the *Daily Telegraph* reported he would.[135] Explaining this decision in an internal memo, the Inland Revenue's Principal Private Secretary recounted that the Select Committee had 'received disproportionately heavy evidence on the wealth tax treatment of the National Heritage generally, and Opposition members have chosen to make an issue of it'. Therefore, Philip could not be seen to align himself against the government in his interview, as there was 'clearly scope for division on party lines' on the issue of heritage exemption.[136] Ultimately, the prince's comments were sufficiently vague to prevent accusations of political partisanship. However, the episode demonstrated how significant the issue of heritage exemptions had become politically. Accordingly, the Select Committee heard from a long list of organisations on the topic, including the HHA, the Arts Council, Museums Association, BTA, Country Landowners Association, HBC for England, Heritage in Danger, Joint Committee of National Amenity Societies, and a range of national museums.[137] These bodies all expressed concern that a Wealth Tax would 'injure the national heritage'.

Hugh Jenkins, the Arts minister, was personally against outright exemption for heritage properties. He recalled feeling 'almost alone in advocating to the Select Committee that the arts should not be allowed to become an inshore tax-haven'.[138] His own staff were almost unanimously in favour of exemptions, and he was frustrated that, although his officials could not contravene his instructions on policy, he 'could not overcome the pusillanimity of [his] colleagues in government'.[139] Jenkins received a barrage of personal attacks in the media for his stance. The

[135] 'Speaking his mind', *Daily Telegraph* (26 Jun. 1975), p. 16.
[136] Internal memo by Mrs C. B. Hubbard, Principle Private Secretary, Inland Revenue, undated, TNA, T 227/4373.
[137] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75), 36, p. cxxvii.
[138] Jenkins, *The Culture Gap*, p. 151.
[139] Ibid., p. 153.

journalist Patrick Hutber called Jenkins the government's worst minister and wrote that 'it is as though Attila the Hun were to be put in charge of the monuments in Ancient Rome'.[140] Such public criticism and a lack of support from Wilson almost drove Jenkins to resignation; he believed the government 'had lost its will for socialism and even reform'.[141]

As Jenkins had anticipated, the Committee became convinced that owners required '*increased* financial resources rather than the diminution which could follow Wealth Tax unrelieved'.[142] They published this view in their first report, printed on 11 November 1975. The Inland Revenue's evidence to the Committee must have shaped this view; their evidence was surprisingly favourable towards private historic house owners. They stressed that 'the Government recognise that private owners can look after the architectural heritage more cheaply and more efficiently than the State or an institution such as the National Trust'.[143] Moreover, they informed the Committee that 'the introduction of the tax must not be allowed to lead to the dispersal of works of art out of the country and to the decay of historic houses'. They held this position because they believed it to be 'accepted on all sides', and quoted Healey's green paper foreword as evidence of the government's commitment to preventing 'the decay of historic houses'.[144] Despite the careful wording of the foreword, it therefore appears that the government had effectively committed itself to some form of heritage exemption by merely mentioning the issue in the green paper—as civil servants interpreted it as a mandate to pursue significant financial concessions. However, the Inland Revenue also noted that the Committee may 'be concerned' that they 'should end up by recommending measures which would create a protected class of owners'.[145] Accordingly, the Committee disagreed with 'almost all their witnesses' who advocated outright exemption for heritage objects subject to public access, instead suggesting a conditional exemption: tax should be deferred unless an object was sold to a private person, and

[140] 'The Minister for the destruction of art …', *Sunday Telegraph* (21 Sep. 1975), p. 23.
[141] Jenkins, *The Culture Gap*, p. 158.
[142] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75), 36 (696-I), p. cxxvii.
[143] Ibid., p. xliv.
[144] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75), 36 (696-II), Select Committee on a Wealth Tax, Session 1974–75, Volume II: Minutes of evidence, pp. 88-90.
[145] Ibid, p. 95.

should not be payable at all if the object was retained until the owner's death or given to the state or a public body.[146] They recommended that this exemption be contingent on an owner providing public access or, if that was not feasible, an owner should be compelled to lend their object to a public exhibition 'for reasonable periods'.[147] In relation to historic houses themselves, the Committee reported:

> … we concluded that some substantial relief from tax was justified but that it ought not to extend to total exemption from both [capital transfer and wealth] taxes. We recommend, therefore, that the existing capital transfer tax relief on death should stand but that, on the death of the owner of an historic house or on his making a gift of it, or on his selling it, wealth tax should be charged for six years back. If, of course, the bequest, gift or sale were to the State or to an appropriate public body no tax would be charged.[148]

They further recommended that the exemption and six-year charge should be applied to lifetime transfers of houses, as well as to transfers upon death. With this clear instruction for the continuation and extension of capital tax exemptions for historic houses and their contents from their own Committee, the government had little option but to enact these exemptions.

Ultimately, exemption of privately owned historic houses from a wealth tax was unnecessary because the wealth tax was quietly abandoned. Initially, the government decided to defer a wealth tax until the 1977 Finance Bill, because forcing the legislation through would, in the Treasury's view, 'run the very serious risk of a botched job'.[149] Meanwhile, public spending cuts and the government's loan from the International Monetary Fund under Labour's new Prime Minister, James Callaghan (from April 1976), dominated the Treasury's attention.[150] Faced with the realities of its implementation, the government realised that a wealth tax raised too many political and administrative problems and necessitated too many exemptions, among which privately owned heritage was only one small facet. However, the Select Committee on the Wealth

[146] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75)*,* 36 (696-I), pp. xlv–xlvi.
[147] Ibid., p. xlvi.
[148] Ibid., p.xlvii–xlvii.
[149] 'Wealth tax timetable: speaking note for Chancellor's meeting with the Prime Minister', 2 Jul. 1975, TNA, T 227/4373.
[150] H. Glennerster, 'Why was a Wealth Tax for the UK Abandoned? Lessons for the Policy Process and Tackling Wealth Inequality', *Journal of Social Policy*, 41/2 (2012), p. 243.

Tax's recommendations for 'substantial relief' for heritage properties would prove to be the basis of future governments' approaches toward privately owned country houses.[151]

Under CTT, historic house owners gained the capital tax exemptions that the BTA's HHC had been asking for since the mid-1960s. However, the achievement of this new tax status was effectively accidental: a result of the government's indecision rather than positive action. While politicians were distracted by the recession, a temporary measure became permanent with limited fanfare or public awareness. With this sleight of hand, conditional CTT exemption became the bedrock of the government's financial support for privately owned country houses.

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At the 1976 Annual General Meeting of the HHA, the President reported on an 'outstanding year of achievement, growth, and public recognition'. The principal achievement was, of course, conditional exemption of heritage property from the newly introduced Capital Transfer Tax, under the 1976 Finance Bill.[152] As Saunders Watson later reflected, the HHA considered this exemption an acknowledgement that the best method of preserving country houses was for them to remain in private hands.[153] The government had not officially come to this conclusion, but the continuation of exemption from CTT was effectively a tacit affirmation of that policy line.

John Cornforth has argued that 'the way the crisis was handled by the amenity movement, the press and the owners, and met with an unprecedented degree of public support, immediately transformed the subject of the limited circle of owners, public bodies and individuals to one of wide public fervour and support'.[154] Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the way in which a crisis was *manufactured* by the amenity movement generated wider public support, in large part because this manufactured crisis was framed as a crisis for the entire national heritage. The

[151] *Parl Pap.* (1974/75), 36 (696-I), p. xxvii.
[152] 'Minutes of the Third Annual General Meeting of the Historic Houses Association, 16 November 1976', Historic Houses Archives, p. 1.
[153] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p.102.
[154] Cornforth, *The Country Houses of England,* p. 6.

favourable exemptions that heritage property was given under CTT were, to a significant extent, the result of the consolidation of existing political networks of those already sympathetic towards privately owned heritage, and their presence across the political spaces in which these issues were debated: the many Lords in the House who owned country houses themselves; the HBC for England; the Select Committee on the Wealth Tax; and Robert Cooke and his office. The existence of a phantom threat to privately owned heritage had resulted in its advocates being allowed the space and time to make a case for more favourable financial arrangements, which would not otherwise have been possible. This was not a matter of changing opinion, but of grasping opportunity.

Political opinion on this issue had already shifted substantially since the early 1960s. No parties argued that tourism alone was sufficient to maintain privately owned country houses, and civil servants and politicians from across the political spectrum publicly supported tax exemptions as necessary for historic house maintenance. The government was already open to concessions that would take the burden of preservation away from the state in 1974, as the green paper for the wealth tax had demonstrated. Nevertheless, opinion was divided over the issue within government in 1974, and it remained so after the legislation changed in 1976. Lobbyists had provided the government with a way to make tax concessions for the asset-rich palatable to the electorate, and taken advantage of an opportunity to push through these concessions without much public debate or fanfare. The HHA's lobbying on the wealth tax was not particularly effective in isolation. It was the (seemingly) broad network of support in government and the arts that cumulatively exerted political pressure on that issue. However, the HHA's lobbying was effective in establishing the strong working relationship that the HHA would enjoy with government—and particularly with the Treasury and Inland Revenue—in the decades to come.

Chapter Four

Lessons of Mentmore:
Establishing Country House Preservation in Public Policy, 1977–89

The fiscal changes implemented in 1975/6 represented the most far-reaching attempt yet to address the issue of country house preservation through legislation. As outlined in the previous chapter, campaigners believed that this legislation demonstrated an opinion shift in favour of private ownership within government. The sale of Mentmore Towers in 1977 would test this belief. This chapter outlines the events surrounding the sale in 1977, and their implications for the political status of privately owned country houses during the transition between Callaghan's government and Thatcher's first ministry. Controversy surrounding the sale led to the establishment of the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), which was designed to enable rapid responses to similar situations in the future, in a process that would be removed from the civil service's control. Far from demonstrating a lack of commitment to the preservation of country houses, the civil service's decision-making process regarding the sale of Mentmore Towers revealed that the Department of Environment (DOE) was willing to devote extensive resources to this category of the national heritage.

Nevertheless, the Thatcher government's favour proved difficult to win for the country house lobby. As explained in the previous chapter, heritage lobbyists had secured conditional exemption from Capital Transfer Tax (CTT) for qualifying historic properties and 'historically associated' land or objects in 1975, during an unstable period in British government. The HHA, which had been formed as an independent organisation largely for the purpose of opposing a threatened wealth tax in 1973, developed political influence rapidly. However, it faced strong opposition from several of Thatcher's key ministers who were unwilling to treat privately owned heritage as a 'special case' for tax purposes.

The Mentmore syndrome

Mentmore Towers was a Rothschild home and remained in the same family until the death of the sixth Earl of Rosebery in 1974. It was built in 1851–54 by Joseph Paxton, the architect of the Crystal Palace, and was based largely on the Elizabethan Wollaton Hall in Nottingham. Marcus Binney described it as 'the only outstanding High Victorian house to survive virtually intact' in SAVE's campaign booklet on the house.[1] Mentmore contained an extensive collection of primarily French and Italian furniture, *objets d'art*, and paintings. However, the house had never been open to the public, and its contents were not widely known. Victorian architecture was only just beginning to attract public appreciation in the 1970s; Mark Girouard's landmark volumes on the subject, *The Victorian Country House* and *Sweetness and Light: The "Queen Anne" Movement, 1860-1900*, were published in 1971 and 1979 respectively. These were not the first serious scholarly works on Victorian architecture, but they were the first to gain a wide readership. Girouard did not comment on Mentmore's significance in *The Victorian Country House*, although he did reference the house when describing typical architectural features of the era.[2] The book was based on Girouard's *Country Life* articles; unlike many houses that contained extensive collections, Mentmore had not been the subject of a feature in that magazine either. Therefore, when the sixth earl's heir approached the government about the possibility of selling the estate and its contents to the DOE in February 1975, being unable to pay the estate duty (of net £859,000 on Mentmore, and a reported £4 million across the other Rosebery estates), few were aware of what was actually on offer. This initial offer of sale, for the house and its contents at a net price of £2.2 million, was formalised in February 1976.[3]

According to an internal Treasury document, the DOE discussed the offer with the V&A, the English HBC, and a public relations firm that believed they had a client (Consolidated Gold

[1] SAVE Britain's Heritage, *SAVE Mentmore for the Nation* (London, 1977), pp. 4-5.
[2] M. Girouard, *The Victorian Country House* (London, 1971).
[3] The amount due in estate duties was not publicly declared; these figures are taken from a confidential note to Lady Birk, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the DOE, from T. H. Shearer, 23 Mar. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/2165.

Fields, a British gold-mining company) 'willing to invest in a major heritage project'.[4] An early plan was for the house to be run as an outpost of the V&A, completing their set of late-seventeenth-, late-eighteenth-, and early-nineteenth-century houses (Ham House, Osterley Park, and Apsley respectively) with a mid-nineteenth-century example. The DOE were willing to contribute £1 million from the NLF towards acquiring Mentmore to facilitate this plan, as part of a public-private partnership with Consolidated Gold Fields. However, the mining company withdrew from negotiations. In the belief that there was no alternative private funding available, the DOE turned down Rosebery's offer on 20 January 1977. At this point, the story of the negotiations was picked up by the press for the first time.[5] Rosebery's response was to apply for twelve objects to be accepted in lieu of estate duty, and to schedule a public auction for the house and its remaining contents for May. The *Daily Mail* reported that Rosebery was sympathetic to the government's decision, and quoted him saying that he believed 'the running expenses would have been so enormous if the Government had taken it over that it just would not have been feasible in the current economic climate'.[6] However, Rosebery later offered the house and its contents to the government again, at a revised price of £3 million, after Sotheby's advised him that the valuation on which his first offer had been based was far lower than he could expect to realise on the international market. It seems that mounting debate surrounding the government's initial decision influenced this second offer.

By the time of the second offer, Mentmore had become a public issue. An extended debate on "the Mentmore question" played out in the letters section of the *Times* during February and March 1977, on an almost daily basis. The main actors were members of the amenity societies and heritage campaigners, who consistently drew attention to the lack of wider consultation and cooperation between government departments as the Mentmore question was considered. On 28 February 1977, the National Art-Collections Fund (a membership-based charity that raised funds to assist national acquisition of artworks, now named Art Fund) complained that none of the

[4] 'Mentmore' [internal HM Treasury document detailing the history of the Mentmore negotiations], 25 Mar. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/2165.
[5] Ibid.
[6] 'Sale of the century . . . the stately home nobody can afford', *Daily Mail* (20 Jan. 1977), p. 3.

bodies that should have been consulted on the Mentmore negotiations were informed before the announcement of the government's refusal on 20 January.[7] Lord Perth, an ex-banker; politician; owner of Stobhall Castle, a country house in Scotland; and Chairman of the Waverley Committee from 1972 to 1976, described the period leading up to the refusal as eighteen months of 'secret and desultory discussion'.[8] The government initially failed to involve the NT in their deliberations. On 15 March the NT's Director-General, Jack Boles, wrote in a letter to the *Times* that his organisation would accept the house 'without hesitation … with sufficient protective land and if adequate funds for its repair and endowment could be found'. Boles wrote that the NT would require a further four months' delay to the sale to determine the size of the required endowment.[9] A figure of £750,000 had been previously suggested, but they were no longer committed to this.[10] The power to extend the deadline lay solely with Rosebery, however, who protested that if he were to delay any longer he would encounter harsher taxation arrangements as a result of the 'three year rule'. This referred to section thirty-nine of the 1969 Finance Act: a property that had been exempted in the wake of a death would become liable for estate duty on the open market value if subsequently sold more than three years after that date. A sale before that date would attract estate duty on the property's value at the date of death only.[11] In a later letter to the DOE, Boles offered that the Trust could act as the government's agent for a short time, and expressed support for the sale of some of the house's contents if the government acquired the entire collection.[12] However, an internal background note on the NT's offer from the DOE described it as 'not particularly helpful as it does nothing to suggest any means of raising private funds'.[13] The DOE's reluctance to involve the NT was explained by their belief that a commercial investment from a private company was the most feasible method of finding the initial cash injection that was desperately needed.

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[7] Letter to the Editor, 'Saving Mentmore for the nation', *Times* (28 Feb. 1977), p. 13.
[8] A. Jones, *Britain's Heritage: The Creation of the National Heritage Memorial Fund* (London, 1985), p. 31.
[9] 'The National Trust and Mentmore', *Times* (15 Mar. 1977), p. 17.
[10] DOE 'background note' [author unknown], undated, TNA, HLG 126/2165.
[11] 'Mentmore' [internal HM Treasury document].
[12] Letter to Baroness Birk from Jack Boles, 23 Mar. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/2165.
[13] 'Mentmore' [internal HM Treasury document].

The lack of transparency in this reasoning prompted criticism. Writing to the *Times* on 17 March, the day after Boles' own statement in that newspaper, Nikolaus Pevsner and the Duke of Grafton complained of the 'deplorable lack of consultation which this sorry tale has revealed'.[14] At the time of writing, Pevsner was President of the Victorian Society and Grafton was Chairman of the Joint Committee of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Georgian Group, Victorian Society, and Civic Trust. Pevsner and Grafton called for the Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Shore, to reconsider the issue in conjunction with the Department for Education and Skills and the NT, and added that 'to ask private charity to find £3m for something which most experts regard as a governmental responsibility is immoral'.[15] Nevertheless, they pledged to help raise charitable donations to aid initial running costs if the government were prepared to supply the £3 million lump sum for purchase. The Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge supported this course of action in a private letter to Baroness Birk (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the DOE) urging collaboration with the NT to preserve the house.[16] These remonstrations to the government, from both amenity societies and museums, reflected a widely held view within the heritage world that the government and DOE had handled the matter incompetently.

The DOE's initial lack of enthusiasm for Rosebery's offer is partly explained by divided opinion over the historical worth of Mentmore. Both professional and public contributions to the debate were divided between passionate condemnations of the government's reluctance to purchase the estate and calls for the government to remain steadfast in turning down the offer. Interestingly, the house's connection to the Rothschild family, and therefore its place in the history of one of Europe's most famous Jewish families and banking dynasties, did not feature in these discussions and was not (overtly) a factor in the government's decision. Retrospectively, this appears to be a huge oversight in assessing the house's historical significance. Historian Leora Auslander has argued that the Rothschild family's mid-nineteenth century country houses

[14] 'The future of Mentmore', *Times* (16 Mar 1977), p. 17.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Letter to Baroness Birk from Professor Michael Jaffé, 1 Apr. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/2165.

represented their cosmopolitanism, embodying the 'hybridity' of their lives as 'super-elites' across Europe.[17] It seems that the cosmopolitan taste on display at Mentmore ultimately counted against the house. As Norman Hudson, then the HHA's retained Technical Adviser, has described, some of 'the fine art people … were rather sniffy about the nature of the contents being those typical of the nineteenth-century *nouveaux riches*'.[18] Similarly, Ken Robinson, Managing Director of the touristic activities at Beaulieu, Lord Montagu's Hampshire estate, reflected that 'nobody wanted to save [Mentmore]'.[19] In a lively debate in *The Times,* which unfolded while the government's position was still uncertain, a Jeffery Daniels argued that 'the recycling of such a heterogeneous loot is surely not a bad thing'.[20] Meanwhile, Jonathan Sumption, who was then adviser to Conservative Shadow Cabinet minister Keith Joseph, questioned that Mentmore Towers was part of the national heritage. He claimed that the only good reason advanced by the campaigners for 'artificially' stopping the circulation of works of art was that the collection was 'particularly valuable *as a collection*'—and yet, if this was the case, he did not see 'why a mid-nineteenth-century collection should be more valuable than the twentieth-century collections which will arise on its ruins'.[21]

More significantly, opposition also came from country house owners. Many of the 'best objects … including the contents of the Drawing Room and the porcelain' were transferred to Dalmeny House, Rosebery's main residence in Scotland.[22] Sir Edmund Stockdale, of Hoddington House, a relatively small country seat in Basingstoke, wrote to Lady Birk to insist that Mentmore was 'nothing special': the 'pictures which were not hurriedly driven to Dalmeny are nothing in comparison with many Collections'.[23] Indeed, Mentmore's status as Rosebery's second house—and the one he was willing to give up—appears to have significantly affected Baroness Birk's

[17] L. Auslander, 'The modern country house as a Jewish form: a proposition', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 18/4 (2019), pp. 466–488.
[18] Interview with Norman Hudson, conducted by Elena Porter, High Wardington House, 28 Jan. 2019; in the author's possession.
[19] Interview with Ken Robinson, conducted by Elena Porter, Historic Houses Association (Chester Street), 15 Feb. 2019; in the author's possession.
[20] Letter to the Editor: 'The sale of Mentmore', *Times* (2 Feb. 1977), p. 17.
[21] 'The future of Mentmore', *Times* (1 Mar. 1977), p. 15.
[22] 'The Collections', https://roseberyestates.co.uk/dalmeny-house/the-rosebery-collection, para. 12 of 12 (3 Jun. 2019).
[23] Letter to Lady Birk from Edmund Stockdale, 15 Mar. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/2165.

attitude towards it. In a Lords debate on 9 March 1977, she claimed that, in her role as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the DOE (1974-79), she had become convinced that private family ownership of a 'splendid' house, coupled with public opening, was the most economic and attractive way of making the heritage publicly accessible. To no small extent, this view must have been fostered by the HHA's lobbying surrounding the wealth tax since 1974. In what she dubbed 'the Mentmore syndrome', Birk stated that the 'mutual passion' for the house between State and owner was missing.[24] The implication was that the DOE would have been more forthcoming with funding if Rosebery had been committed personally to ensuring the continuation of the house and contents as one entity. Moreover, the DOE was opposed to procuring *any* historic house for the state, let alone one with dubious claims to pre-eminence. In a Commons debate on 4 April 1977, Peter Shore reinforced this view in his statement that 'the wider and more difficult question is to assess the place of Mentmore in the whole context of the enormous and costly national heritage that we have and intend to preserve'.[25] The DOE appeared to have fully absorbed the view that acquiring Mentmore was not as cost-effective as economically supporting multiple privately owned country houses.

However, the DOE had responded to increased public pressure since 20 January by devoting considerable time to deliberating over both Rosebery's £3 million offer and the objects he had offered in lieu of tax. Once they began to consider the objects offered in lieu of tax, they were condemned in the press for an apparently illogical approach. It was widely thought that £2 million from the NLF would be made available to buy individual pieces from the Mentmore estate, and therefore the government would ultimately spend (on a few items) the amount for which it had been offered the entire house and its contents in 1976. Marcus Binney described this situation as 'absurd' in March 1977.[26] The Treasury's and Inland Revenue's working files reveal that countering this presumption was one of their key concerns. In a document commenting on the "public relations aspects" of the Mentmore sale, a Treasury official conceded that the initial

[24] Hansard, HL Deb 9 Mar. 1977, vol 380, c1142.
[25] Hansard, HC Deb 4 Apr. 1977, vol 929, cc867–71.
[26] 'Earl will not extend Mentmore deadline', *Daily Telegraph* (25 Mar. 1977).

£2.2 million purchase offer for Mentmore now appeared generous, particularly in light of the revaluation of artworks in the collection. However, they noted that this sum did not represent the full public cost; the house required extensive repair and renovation if it were to be opened to the public.[27] The MHLG commissioned an external organisation to forecast the running costs for maintaining Mentmore as a tourist attraction, including the cost of leasing it to be run by Trafalgar House, a conglomerate with interests in property development and hotels.[28] On 9 March, the DOE announced that they were willing to contribute £1 million, if £2 million could be procured from private donations. However, efforts to find donors before the ultimate deadline of the contents sale, held by Sotheby's between 18 and 28 May 1977, proved insufficient.

Public criticism from the amenity societies had steadily grown since the announcement of Rosebery's first offer in January. On 31 January, a *Daily Mail* journalist reported that the government had turned down an 'unrepeatable bargain' by refusing the Mentmore offer.[29] Between 25 and 29 January, with a rapidity that reflected their belief in the urgency of the project, Marcus Binney's SAVE Britain's Heritage produced a campaign booklet urging the government to rethink its position and suggesting that the public were unaware of the rarity of what would be lost.[30] The booklet included several essays on the historical importance of the house and its contents by Binney and architectural historians John Martin Robinson and John Harris. Binney called for the government to grant a tax reprieve of one year, in order to allow more people to access the house and come to a reasoned decision regarding its potential worth to the public. He argued that the government's approach to Mentmore was inconsistent with their previously stated commitment 'to make the national heritage more accessible to the public through capital transfer tax and the intended wealth tax'.[31] The DOE entertained Binney's suggestion, and—in a prime example of the government's mixed communication during these months—a spokesperson for the DOE told the press that talks were underway for a 'staggered take over' on 21 February.[32] By

[27] 'Mentmore' [internal HM Treasury document], p. 5.
[28] Letter to Sir Robert Marshall from T. H. Shearer, TNA, HLG 126/2165.
[29] 'The Rosebery mistake', *Daily Mail* (31 Jan. 1977), p. 6.
[30] SAVE Britain's Heritage, *SAVE Mentmore for the Nation*.
[31] Letter to the Editor, 'The sale of Mentmore', *Times* (26 Jan. 1977), p. 15.
[32] 'New plan for stately home', *Daily Mail* (21 Feb. 1977), p. 10.

April, the notion of Mentmore as an imperilled national treasure was established in the press. In an article claiming that the government's attitude would create a land fit only for philistines, the *Daily Mail* stated that 'millions of people in this country care' about Mentmore's fate.[33] On 19 April, a Mrs Judy Linfield wrote to the *Mail* to inform them that, 'like many other ordinary people', she had been waiting for a public appeal to save Mentmore to get underway. In the meantime, she had sent 'a small donation' to Patrick Cormack, the MP most vocal in defending Mentmore.[34] Marcus Binney recalled that there was 'an amazing amount of controversy' in the press surrounding the issue when the government refused Rosebery's second offer, and widespread anger at the national 'loss' of the estate that this decision was considered to determine.[35]

Press coverage of the sale of Mentmore and its contents is also interesting for its largely complimentary representation of the Roseberys. The sale proved to be a fruitful source for human interest pieces in the *Daily Mail* on the lifestyle of the English aristocracy, romanticising the country house "way of life". A sympathetic article on the first day of the sale described the Dowager Lady Rosebery as putting on a 'brave face' while she oversaw the dispersal of her family heirlooms.[36] Subsequent coverage of the sale featured a piece on the career of the Rosebery butler, and a description of the Dowager Lady Rosebery endearing all present at the auction to her family and the house by distributing 150 thistle motifs made of gold silk.[37] Another piece, entitled 'Upstairs Downstairs', playing on the popularity of the 1971–75 television programme, painted the eighty-four-year-old Lady's life at Mentmore as one of amicable coexistence with her seven staff members—not outdated, but pleasingly eccentric.[38] With a combination of these character pieces on the Dowager and criticism of the government's handling of Lord Rosebery's offers, the majority of press coverage was firmly in sympathy with the Rosebery family. Given that the sale

[33] 'A land fit for Philistines', *Daily Mail* (11 Apr. 1977), p. 6.
[34] 'Save it – please!', *Daily Mail* (19 Apr. 1977), p. 24.
[35] Interview with Marcus Binney, conducted by Elena Porter, SAVE Britain's Heritage (Cowcross Street), 3 Apr. 2019; in the author's possession.
[36] 'Countess washes the Towers out of her hair', *Daily Mail* (18 May 1977), p. 11.
[37] 'Only Champagne for Jeeves!', *Daily Mail* (21 May 1977), p. 7; 'How the looters became the Mentmore fan club', *Daily Mail* (28 May 1977), p. 6.
[38] 'Upstairs Downstairs', *Daily Mail* (28 Jan. 1977), p. 3.

of Mentmore was ultimately the sale of a second home, and the Roseberys' most prized chattels were safe in the main family residence, this level of public support is surprising. The Roseberys remained an extremely wealthy family with extensive land holdings. The "loss to the nation" that was under discussion was never the loss of the family connection to the house, or the loss of public access (which had never existed), but the separation of the house and its collections. The sympathetic press ignored the fact that the 'best' of those collections were already gone; public procurement of Mentmore Towers as a Victorian time-capsule was never achievable. Nevertheless, press coverage of the saga demonstrated that the idea of the country house as a key element of Britain's cultural history, as espoused in the *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition in 1974 and the surrounding campaign against a wealth tax, had found public support.

When the elected government and civil service rejected Rosebery's offers, they were not rejecting the concept of country house heritage—as many campaigners would have the public believe—but rejecting the reconfigured elements of his family's heritage with which the seventh Earl of Rosebery was willing to part. The government's (eventual) detailed consideration of the offers suggests that the wealth tax campaigns in 1974–6 had made a lasting impression on both the governing Labour Party and the civil servants in the DOE. The ownership model of a live-in family presiding over a publicly open house was promoted by both the government and, often implicitly, in the press as the most economically and culturally advantageous way of maintaining a house such as Mentmore. The DOE defended their final decision with the claim that 'it has been the view of successive governments that the best way of securing the preservation of historic houses in this country is to encourage private owners to continue to occupy and maintain them, making arrangements for public access wherever possible'.[39] In many ways, the Mentmore problem had thrown the benefits of supporting private ownership with public money into sharper relief, and reinforced the government's newfound commitment to supporting it.

[39] Letter to Mr Mynett from C. M. Dodd (DOE), 31 Jul. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/1294.

The 'mythical' Land Fund

Much of the uproar over Mentmore had centred on the 'true' purpose and status of the National Land Fund (NLF). The oft-quoted prime example of this is Baroness Birk's description of the Fund in a Lords debate on 9 March 1977, when she (as Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the DOE) stated,

> It looks like some enormous piggy-bank providing cash for this kind of eventuality; but the keys to it are then hidden in a whole series of Chinese boxes. This is how it seems to work. There is nothing simple about it at all. It seems to me to be the greatest misnomer of all time. The Fund seems to be rather mythical. It comes and goes; it is there, and it is not.[40]

The government's critics believed that the NLF had been created for the sole purpose of protecting heritage, and ring-fenced for that purpose. However, Baroness Birk claimed that 'Mentmore could be purchased only at the price of an equivalent cut in housing and other programmes, and this is the rub. It is a cut in public expenditure.'[41] In the same debate, the Earl of Mansfield, the opposition Spokesman, simply asserted of the NLF, 'As we all know, in fact nothing of the kind exists'.[42] Five days later, Lord Eccles, who had been Minister of the Arts from 1970 to 1973, claimed that the Chancellor 'should resist the conservation lobby for Mentmore until he can provide enough money for the buildings, collections and living arts for which he is directly or indirectly responsible', reinforcing the notion that the NLF was not a separate fund.[43] Yet, on 23 March, the *Daily Telegraph* described the NLF as a '£17.5 million reserve for historic houses and works of art'.[44] This figure was given in an internal Treasury document of 22 April 1977, which stated the extent of the fund as of 31 March.[45] Arthur Jones, who chaired a subsequent enquiry into the government's decision-making process for the Mentmore Towers case, claimed that the fund stood at £18,245,948 in July 1977.[46] Confusion over the NLF's status arose because demands

[40] Hansard, HL Deb 9 March 1977, vol 380, c1138.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., c1052.
[43] Letter to the Editor, 'The future of Mentmore', *Times* (14 Mar. 1977), p. 17.
[44] 'Mentmore paintings for nation', *Daily Telegraph* (23 Mar. 1977), p. 1.
[45] 'The National Land Fund', 22 Apr. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/2165.
[46] Jones, *Britain's Heritage*, p. 30.

on it had been relatively small until 1976. Its gradual transformation into a 'central government fund' had not been challenged, because there had been no difficulty in meeting the demands for acquisition of land and buildings that had been raised.[47] This was despite its controversial reduction in 1959, when it was reduced from £59 million to £10 million to free up capital for other—more urgent—spending. It was only in the context of the severe public spending restrictions in force in 1976, in relation to the government's loan from the International Monetary Fund, that the question of the Fund's status arose again.[48]

The confusion surrounding Mentmore's sale had made it clear to heritage campaigners, many MPs, and civil servants that the decision-making process for such extraordinary cases needed to be extricated from the Treasury. On 13 July 1977, Peter Shore wrote to the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, Joel Barnett, expressing his concern over the 'ad hoc way in which the Government, as opposed to its Constituent departments, seemed to take decisions on matters concerning the national heritage'. He stated that,

> ... the Mentmore experience has indicated clearly the need for closer co-ordination and inter alia for the establishment of an early warning system when houses and contents having equivalent or greater importance than Mentmore come onto the market in future.[49]

To this end, Shore recommended the establishment of an inter-departmental working group comprising the Treasury, Inland Revenue, and the Departments of the Environment, Education, and Science and Trade, in order to reassess the government's handling of the NLF. This became the Environment Sub-Committee (ESC) within the Select Committee on Expenditure. Their enquiry was held over November and December 1977, and led to the establishment of the National Heritage Memorial Fund in 1980.[50] The Chairman was Arthur Jones, Conservative MP for Daventry. In 1985 Jones published a book detailing the course of the ESC's enquiry, in which he sought to answer how far the Treasury had been responsible for the 'tragic' Mentmore auction

[47] Ibid., p. 71.
[48] *Parliamentary Papers* (1977/78), xxxi (31), Third Report from the Expenditure Committee (Environment Sub-Committee): National Land Fund, p. 32 [of minutes of evidence]; also mentioned in Jones, *Britain's Heritage*, p. 66.
[49] Letter to Joel Barnett from Peter Shore (DOE), 13 Jul. 1977, TNA, HLG 126/1249.
[50] *Parl Pap.* (1977/78), xxxi, p. xiii.

and, therefore, whether the Treasury 'governed Britain'.[51] Jones' account drew attention to the endemic confusion surrounding the form and function of the NLF within both the Treasury and the DOE. Firstly, the committee attempted to ascertain how the fund was understood by the Treasury, concluding that,

> The Fund is regarded as a central government fund, a part of the public domain: it was created out of public money; its capital is invested in government securities; its source of income is from the Exchequer; and it is under the control of the Treasury.[52]

However, they emphasised the 'widespread confusion as to the precise nature of the Fund as operated by the Treasury'. They stated that payments from the fund did not constitute public expenditure and recommended that the Treasury ceased to view them as such.[53]

The Expenditure Committee's 381-page report on the NLF is evidence of a thorough and serious attempt to reform the funding framework, and it was met with relief by heritage campaigners (many of whom contributed to the enquiry). The report noted that the Committee had decided 'in the light of recent concern over the fate of the national heritage in general, and of the affair over Mentmore in particular, to examine the National Land Fund, with special reference to public expenditure'.[54] Mentmore was undoubtedly the direct inspiration for the enquiry: it was referenced in the report and minutes of evidence 175 times. Hugh Leggatt, chairman of Heritage in Danger, told the *Daily Telegraph* that the report would 'change the face of the heritage'. He believed that the Committee's enquiry was the first time that the issue had been 'treated with the seriousness it merits and the proposals go far beyond our wildest dreams'.[55] The Committee comprised five Labour MPs and four Conservative MPs, one of whom was a country house owner.[56] As Marcus Binney and other campaigners had done while negotiations over Mentmore

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[51] Jones, *Britain's Heritage*.
[52] *Parl Pap.* (1977/78), xxxi, p. xvii.
[53] Ibid., pp. xx – xxii.
[54] Ibid., p. xiii
[55] 'End Treasury's Clutch on Heritage, Say MPs', *Daily Telegraph* (15 Jun. 1978), p. 6.
[56] As mentioned previously, the Committee was chaired by Arthur Jones, Conservative MP for Daventry. Other members included William Benyon, Conservative MP for Buckingham and owner of Englefield House, an Elizabethan country house in Buckinghamshire; Arthur Blenkinsop, Labour MP for South Shields and Vice-President of the Ramblers Association; James Boyden, Labour MP for Bishop Auckland; Michael Latham, Conservative MP for Melton; Alex Lyon, Labour MP for York; Eric Moonman, Labour MP for Basildon; Tim Sainsbury, Conservative MP for Hove; and Julius Silverman, Labour MP for Birmingham Erdington. See: *Parl Pap.* (1977/78), xxxi, p. v.

were still taking place, the Committee emphasised Healey's foreword in the green paper on a wealth tax to claim that it was 'acknowledged Government policy' to 'prevent the dispersal of the national heritage' and instead ensure that it 'becomes more readily available to the public generally'.[57] In this context, they presented the NLF as a necessary contingency measure for when tax reliefs and acceptance-in-lieu provisions proved insufficient to prevent international dispersal of 'the national heritage'. Freed from public expenditure controls, they claimed, the NLF could become flexible enough to act as an effective instrument for achieving the government's stated aims of preventing dispersal and increasing access, not only for buildings and their contents, but also for gardens or elements of the countryside. As the Committee (and many of those who appeared before them) pointed out, the fund had not been used to protect the countryside, despite Dalton's original intentions.[58] They highlighted this omission without minimising the importance of historic houses—instead reinforcing the importance of tax exemptions for owners of heritage property as an integral part of the government's provisions for protecting national heritage.

In response to the report, a white paper on a National Heritage Fund (to replace the NLF) was produced in 1979. It made clear that the government accepted the Committee's argument that the fund was inadequate in its current state, as 'the statutory and other limitations under which it functions prevent it from making the full contribution which it might in the furtherance of heritage policy'.[59] The new fund was established on 1 April 1980, under the control of a small number of trustees, to 'include some laymen and some who are well informed about, though not necessarily expert in' heritage.[60] To prevent the uncertainty about maintenance arrangements that had overshadowed the Mentmore negotiations, the trustees were empowered to assist other institutions in purchasing items or buildings only, and not to make purchases on behalf of the government.[61] The fund was invested with an initial lump sum of £15 million, topped up with annual instalments of £5 million, to be reassessed in several years' time.[62] The white

[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., p. xvi.
[59] *Parl Pap.* (1979), Cm 7428, White Paper: A National Heritage Fund, p. 1.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., p. 2.
[62] Ibid.

paper also suggested replacing the existing system enabling works of art to be accepted by the government in lieu of tax with one in which owners offered works to museums and galleries, which would then apply for help to purchase them from the heritage fund.[63] This had the advantage of enabling purchases to be made 'whether or not the sale was occasioned by a tax debt', and was therefore a significant policy change.

The fund that was eventually created was named the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), and it began to operate in 1980.[64] Inclusion of the word 'memorial' in the title was disputed; it was intended to reflect the original purpose of the fund as a memorial to those who had died during the 1939–45 wars, but it was thought that this could prompt the erroneous assumption that the fund was intended to create memorials. In a Lords debate on this topic, Baroness Birk (Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the DOE) reinforced the new fund's direct link to Mentmore:

> I think just to have the word "Memorial" could be taken as a memorial to the heritage or it could be a memorial to Mentmore, but I do not think that it would be at all clear to certain people who do not know the history of the Land Fund and any young people.[65]

There was no doubt that the NHMF was designed as a direct response to the government's perceived inadequacy in responding to the Mentmore sale. Marcus Binney's reflection that the heritage campaigners 'lost the battle but won the war' over Mentmore has been echoed by many since.[66] Michael Saunders Watson, a key executive member of the HHA, retrospectively described its creation as 'an enlightened move at a time of considerable financial difficulty', and it appeared to signal a newly prominent place for heritage in the new government's policy agenda.[67]

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[63] '£15m National Heritage Fund to Protect Art and Countryside', *Daily Telegraph* (14 Feb. 1979), p. 8.
[64] *Parl Pap.* (1979), Cm 7428, p. 4.
[65] Hansard, HL Deb 28 February 1980, vol 405, c1523.
[66] Interview with Marcus Binney, conducted by Elena Porter, SAVE Britain's Heritage (Cowcross Street), 3 Apr. 2019.
[67] Michael Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle* (Norfolk, 2008), p. 112.

A sacrificial cow? Mentmore's legacy and the new government

The HHA had not launched a campaign in support of government acquisition of Mentmore. Indeed, it was in their interests to remain largely removed from the discussion. Michael Saunders Watson described the event as 'none of [the HHA's] business' in his autobiography, and noted that 'in any case, if there had to be a sacrificial cow, Mentmore was rather a good one'.[68] While not considered to be one of England's more significant houses and collections by fine art connoisseurs, its 'loss' was a signal that—in the wake of the new taxation arrangements and the *Destruction* exhibition—country houses were still vulnerable.[69] George Howard, owner of Castle Howard and then Chairman of the HHA, lent his voice to the debate on Mentmore in the *Times* on 8 February 1977. He used the opportunity to highlight the episode as an example of the threats faced by 'the majority' of historic houses and their collections, particularly as a result of the existing rates of duty on their associated agricultural estates (under both estate duty and CTT). He was in support of acquisition of the house and its contents, commenting that Mentmore 'may be little more than a hundred years old, but the totality is just as historic as those which have lasted for two or more centuries'.[70] The main point as far as the HHA was concerned, however, was not the particular national value of Mentmore, but how the event highlighted the impracticality of public acquisition of country houses. Lord Montagu took advantage of the public focus on the house to emphasise the need for a new tax case to 'cover the hundreds of small houses in this country, which are as much a tourist attraction as are the large houses', in the *Spectator*.[71] The Mentmore sale substantially strengthened the HHA's case for fiscal arrangements that supported private ownership, while requiring the lobbyists themselves merely to draw attention to this wider political point without labouring it.

[68] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 111.
[69] Interview with Norman Hudson, conducted by Elena Porter, High Wardington House, 28 Jan. 2019; in the author's possession.
[70] Letters to the Editor: 'The future of Mentmore Towers', *Times* (8 Feb. 1977), p. 17.
[71] 'Historic Houses', *New Statesman* (22 Apr. 1977), p. 52.

In the late 1970s, the HHA's main priorities were ensuring that the details of newly introduced tax exemptions benefited as many historic house owners as possible and ensuring continuity in the approaches of changing governments. In 1976, qualifying historic properties and 'historically associated' land or objects had been granted conditional exemption from CTT, and tax-free maintenance funds had been introduced to provide income for the maintenance, repair, or preservation of qualifying historic properties. In attempt to maintain and enhance these provisions, the HHA continued to cultivate allies across both of the main political parties: Callaghan's Labour ministers, and the Conservative ministers in opposition. At the 1977 HHA's AGM in November, Airey Neave, Conservative MP for Abingdon (and brother-in-law to Peter Gifford, President of the Country Landowners Association), stated that, 'For every Mentmore, many a once prosperous business, large or small, has been destroyed this very year. Many an ancient and beautiful house is shuttered and forlorn'.[72] Neave claimed it was untrue that support of private house owners was no longer a party issue. In 'encouraging the wider ownership of property', and following 'a firm policy for creating wealth instead of only destroying it', he said, the Conservative Party were private owners' natural allies.[73] However, this assessment overlooked the implications of the Conservatives' focus on non-intervention: the Party did not intend to intervene in the creation of wealth, but neither would they step in with extensive concessions to prevent the sale of heritage assets on the open market (as the Labour government had contemplated in the case of Mentmore). For many ministers within the Conservative Party, it was contradictory to treat historic house owners as a 'special case', deserving of special tax exemptions above the Party's intended reductions to capital taxation.

The HHA's interests were therefore by no means thoroughly aligned with those of the Conservative Party—within which there was divided opinion toward privately owned heritage. Indeed, the timing of the election of a Conservative government threatened to undermine the concessions for which the HHA had campaigned, as the existing Labour government had not yet

[72] 'Extract from a speech by Airey Neave, M.P. (Abingdon), the Opposition Spokesman on Northern Ireland, speaking at the A.G.M. of the Historic Houses Association', Conservative Central Office News Service, 1 Nov. 1977, PA, AN/324, 1108/77.
[73] Ibid.

fully implemented the favourable changes. When Montagu, Grafton, Howard, and Saunders Watson gained an audience with Thatcher in her role as Leader of the Opposition 'early in 1978', to make their case for the necessity of special reliefs from the newly introduced CTT, both Geoffrey Howe (Shadow Chancellor) and Michael Heseltine (Shadow Environment Secretary) stated that they were against special exemptions that would overcomplicate the tax system. Thatcher reportedly responded to her ministers by retorting that there was 'no way' that taxes could be reduced sufficiently to enable a house such as Castle Howard to be maintained from income after tax. She therefore instructed Howe to set up a working party and report back on the issue within a month. Before leaving the meeting, she announced that the new government's 'first priority will be to draw the teeth of this socialist tax, capital transfer tax, and then to reduce the level of income tax so that you will all have more money to spend'.[74] Thatcher may have been influenced in this sympathetic attitude toward historic house owners by Neave, who had so firmly positioned himself and his party as owners' 'natural allies', and had been instrumental in securing Thatcher's victory in the Conservative leadership contest.[75] Peter Rees, an 'old friend [of Michael Saunders Watson] from [Country Landowners' Association] days', was charged with the report, which endorsed the concept of heritage maintenance funds and made recommendations to ensure their feasibility as well as advising on the income tax position on historic houses.[76] The HHA did not see this report, but enhanced heritage maintenance funds featured in a September 1978 Conservative Party publication on the Party's intended approach to the arts, if elected.[77]

Despite Thatcher's belief in the legitimacy of considering concessions for historic house owners, her cabinet were not fully convinced. When the new Conservative government came to power under Thatcher's leadership on 4 May 1979, their June budget marked a radical change to

[74] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 116.
[75] B. Harrison, 'Neave, Airey Middleton Sheffield (1916–1979), intelligence officer and politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Sept. 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31488 (13 Jun. 2019).
[76] The concept of a heritage maintenance fund was one of designated capital assets, exempt from capital taxes, from which the income would be dedicated to maintenance of a house and its contents. See: Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 116.
[77] Conservative Political Centre, 'The Arts – The Way Forward: A Conservative Discussion Paper' (London, 1978), p. 36.

the economy. Public spending was cut, Value Added Tax was raised to a single rate of fifteen per cent, and the top rate of income tax on 'earned income' was reduced from eighty-three to sixty per cent.[78] Geoffrey Howe, the new Chancellor, also announced a 'thorough study' on capital taxation, 'with a view to legislation … at an early date'.[79] Given such a radical change of economic direction, the Treasury and the Chancellor were reluctant to make additional changes that would favour a small number of people. This would be antithetical to the government's manifesto pledge to reduce state intervention.[80] Thatcher's biographer John Campbell described the new Prime Minister's objective of 'refrain[ing] from detailed intervention in the economy generally' as part of her 'fundamental philosophy of anti-socialist economics'.[81] A memorandum from Lord Cockfield, Minister of State at the Treasury, in July 1979, summarised the government's position:

> With a top rate of tax on income of 60%, and possibly ultimately 50%, a top rate of capital transfer tax of 60% or even 50% and a threshold of £100,000 there should be a sufficient supply of people of sufficient means to keep at least a considerable part of the heritage alive and well in private hands.

Under the new taxation arrangements, Cockfield claimed, 'the argument that the owner of a stately home has been forced by taxation to dispose of it, or to sell his pictures or other contents of the house is increasingly improbable'.[82] There was no opposing the winds of social change, he argued, but owners should be encouraged to set up charitable trusts and maintenance funds when tax reliefs proved incapable of preventing the break-up of estates and their collections. Moreover, he believed that if all the concessions that the government considered acceptable were to be given that year, the HHA and other heritage lobbyists would use this as a 'springboard' for further demands in 1980.[83]

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[78] Hansard, HC Deb 12 June 1979, vol 968, cc246–52; The top rate of income tax applied to taxable income over £25,000. See: Ibid., c258.
[79] Ibid., c255.
[80] Thatcher spoke of restoring 'the balance of power in favour of the people' and away from the state. See: 'Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979', foreword, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858 (11 Nov. 2020).
[81] J. Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady* (London, 2008), p. 15.
[82] Memorandum from Lord Cockfield to the Chancellor, 16 Jul. 1979, TNA, IR 40/19604, p. 3.
[83] Ibid., p. 4.

Minutes of a meeting on capital taxation on 29 October 1979, between Howe; the Chief Secretary; Ministers of State for the Lords and Commons; and five representatives from both the Treasury and the Inland Revenue, reveal that this unenthusiastic attitude towards the heritage lobby permeated throughout the government:

> The Chancellor accepted that some gesture was necessary to the heritage lobby but it should be as limited as possible; was it essential for 1980? He was reminded that there was a commitment to act in 1980 on maintenance funds and Case I relief for losses incurred in opening houses. The Minister of State (Lords) said that he would produce a paper on the heritage shortly and it was agreed that decisions should wait until then.[84]

The new Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, was similarly unwilling to be an ally to the HHA. Michael Saunders Watson recounted an 'extraordinary' meeting between himself, George Howard, Heseltine and several DOE officials, in which Heseltine shocked everyone present by declaring the notion of public access to private property 'appalling'.[85] Having fought hard for an all-party consensus on tax exemptions for heritage property, and being anxious to maintain it, Saunders Watson and Howard insisted that public access had become established as a cornerstone of the relationship between heritage properties and capital taxation: necessary in pursuit of the greater good of keeping historic houses in the ownership of families who were dedicated to them. By contrast, Heseltine took the view that an owner who could not afford to live in their historic house ought to 'sell it to someone who can'.[86] Michael Saunders Watson reflected that the Conservatives were 'not too keen on 'old' money', and found 'the idea of supporting ostensibly rich aristocrats in historic houses rather embarrassing'.[87]

[84] 'CAPITAL TAXES: Meeting held in the Treasury, Monday 29 October at 9am', undated, TNA, IR 40/19604.
[85] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 123.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., p. 118.

The National Heritage Memorial Fund and the final country house crises?

Meanwhile, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which had been established in 1980, made significant contributions towards country house preservation. In its first few years, the NHMF dispensed grants to a wide variety of projects and helped public bodies to acquire a range of objects, buildings, and land. Its early reports nevertheless devoted considerable space to discussion of the preservation of privately owned historic houses, following the precedent set by the HBCs. Describing the purpose of the NHMF, the first report described the 'glory' in 'an historic house saved from disintegration, a fine picture retained in this country, or a tract of land and its wildlife safeguarded from undesirable development'.[88] This ordering of the list does not appear to have been accidental. In an introduction most likely penned by Lord Charteris (NHMF Chairman), the Fund made clear its position on historic houses. It outlined the problems with the existing legislation, including the imposition of VAT on repairs of listed buildings acting as a disincentive to conservation, and the government's refusal to give tax credit or 'change' when items offered in lieu were worth more than the tax bill. The NHMF trustees also argued for income tax allowances for repairs to listed buildings. They claimed that these would benefit smaller houses, unlike the current Heritage Maintenance Funds which, they objected, only benefited the largest houses.[89] The country house had acquired another institutional ally in the NHMF.

One of the Fund's great strengths was thought to be its independence from government control. The first report noted that this independence enabled 'greater flexibility and faster reaction'.[90] This view was shared across the heritage bodies.[91] However, the NHMF was not intended to replace existing preservation mechanisms; indeed, it was insufficiently endowed to do much more than 'top up' the HBCs' work. NHMF trustees described it as a 'safety net' to be used 'in the final resort', when other options had been exhausted.[92] Its starting sum, in 1980, was

[88] *Parl Pap.* (1980/81), HC 394, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Annual Report 1980–81, p. 1.
[89] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[90] Ibid., p. 1.
[91] For example, see: *Parl Pap.* (1981/82), HC 259, Historic Buildings Council for Scotland, Report for 1980–81, p. 1.
[92] *Parl Pap.* (1980/81), HC 394, p. 4.

£12,400,000.[93] The DOE and the Office of Arts and Libraries were charged with contributing equal amounts to the Fund annually, so that it did not risk excessive depletion in any one year, and was able to maintain investments that provided a steady (if low) income. However, this contribution was not fixed, and stretched government departments were reluctant to provide further cash for a Fund that had not depleted its resources. On 20 October 1983, Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment, wrote to Lord Gowrie, Minister of State for the Arts, opposing the latter's suggestion that the two departments reduce their contribution to the NHMF for the coming year. Jenkin argued that the minimum contribution for the Fund to remain 'viable or credible' would be £3 million total, £1.5 million from each department.[94] Gowrie had argued that—in view of the additional payments to the NHMF that were under negotiation in that financial year—the government's annual cash injection to the Fund for 1983–84 could be reduced from the (combined) £11 million given in 1982–83 to nothing, or almost nothing.[95] Although the NHMF appeared to have extensive funds at its disposal, it was reluctant to spend them because of this uncertainty regarding future government contributions. The Fund's Secretary, Brian Lang, described it as a 'double bind', telling the *Times*, 'If we spend all our capital we can no longer operate as an emergency fund, yet if we do not, the government can accuse us of not using our resources'.[96]

Although its funds were limited, the NHMF was free to distribute money wherever it saw fit. It was far more explicitly supportive of private ownership of historic properties than the civil service. As Lang put it, 'on no occasion during the Fund's existence has government pressure, through either ministers or officials, been exerted upon the Fund either to support a particular project, or not to support a particular project'.[97] Speaking at the Historic Houses Association's 1982 AGM as Chairman of the NHMF, Martin Charteris had echoed the Gowers Report of 1950 in his assertion that 'Most people would agree that the country house with its contents, its

[93] *Parl Pap.* (1983/84), HC 93, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Account 1982–83, p. 3.
[94] 'Public Expenditure Survey — National Heritage Memorial Fund', 20 Oct. 1983, TNA, AT 45/63.
[95] Grant figures for 1983–84 listed in *Parl Pap.* (1983/84), HC 93, p. 5.
[96] 'Heritage trust fund dreads a big claim', *Times* (23 Apr. 1982), p. 6.
[97] Brian Lang, 'The National Heritage Memorial Fund', *Archives*, 15/67 (1 Apr. 1982), p.139.

landscapes and its gardens must represent one of the greatest contributions made to civilisation by the people of these islands'.[98] Being a 'sizeable chunk' of the nation's heritage, they were 'by definition' the concern of the NHMF. Moreover, his assertion of the importance of the ancestral family and contents of an historic house was much more overt than any government pronouncement of this time:

> The country house is essentially the creation of a family and ought to have a family living in it with all the attendant mess, chaos and vitality. The house ought also, in our opinion, to retain its contents. No one wishes to walk around a shell which, however beautiful it may be as a structure, retains little of its character because those objects which have been lovingly collected over the generations have been dispersed. Generally speaking, therefore, it is the Fund's philosophy that heritage objects are best left in private ownership.[99]

It is unsurprising that Martin Charteris, who had recently retired as the Queen's Principal Private Secretary, and held his Chairmanship of the NHMF alongside his position as provost of Eton, should defend the interests of the cash-poor aristocracy. In his focus on country houses, he appears to have been fully supported by the other NHMF trustees: the 'cultured generalists, representing the whole of British heritage' that Norman St. John-Stevas, then Minister for the Arts, had sought to appoint.[100] Among them were Diana Neave, Baroness Airey of Abingdon, a Conservative peer who had received her life peerage in 1979; the Marquess of Anglesey, who had given his family home, Plas Newydd, to the National Trust in 1976; Robin Cooke, Conservative MP and owner of Athelhampton House; Prof F. G. T. Holliday, Vice Chancellor of Durham University; Rex Richards, Vice Chancellor of Oxford University and Director of IBM; Charles Kinahan, a member of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland; and Maurice Lindsay, a Scottish poet. The individual who most stood out among the trustees was Clive Jenkins, the trade unionist and Labour politician. These 'cultured generalists' were unpaid, on the grounds that it 'would not be right to pay the trustees at the expense of the heritage'.[101] Labour politician Andrew Faulds criticised this decision on the grounds that a lack of remuneration would discourage anyone other

[98] *Historic Houses*, winter 1982, Historic Houses Archives, p. 12.
[99] Ibid., p. 12.
[100] Hansard, HC Deb 3 December 1979, vol 975, c60.
[101] Hansard, HC Deb 30 January 1980, vol 977, cc1436–68.

than the 'usual establishment assortment' to serve on the board.[102] In 1982, Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright believed that Faulds had been proved correct, describing the trustees as 'drawn from the heartlands of establishment ideology', in place to defend the 'historicized image of the establishment'.[103] If similar opinions were held beyond left-wing scholars of history and sociology, they were not widely voiced outside of the Commons. When the Fund spent £160,000 to aid the National Trust in purchasing a Bellotto painting for Powis Castle in 1982, on the grounds that the painting had been in situ since the eighteenth century (it was 'virtually a part of the fabric of Powis Castle'), the decision was repeatedly defended in their annual report.[104] It did not attract significant criticism, although it might easily have been argued that the painting was insignificant when considered in the context of the nation's existing collections.

The Fund quickly established itself as a lifeline for 'threatened' historic houses. When Canons Ashby, a Tudor manor house in Northamptonshire, was offered to the NT in 1980, the NT looked to the NHMF as the only means of securing an endowment, and therefore the house's future. The *Times* speculated that the NHMF might decide to reserve their money for a more popular house, but the Fund was quick to come to the rescue with £1 million towards the endowment and a further £500,000 towards repairs.[105] A succession of country house rescue grants followed. For some, they did not come soon enough. Charles McKean, writing for the *Times*, expressed alarm that the NHMF had only saved one stately home, Hever Castle, in the financial year of 1982-83.[106] This changed when seventeenth-century Belton House, deemed 'the most important house to come under the auctioneer's hammer for many years' by *Country Life*, went up for sale in 1983.[107] According to its 1983–84 Report, the purchase of Belton House marked the 'coming of age' of the NHMF. The decision to give the NT £8 million to make the purchase at short notice, without government approval or additional funds, demonstrated the

[102] Ibid.
[103] P. Wright and M. Bonnes, 'Charms of residence: the public and the past', in R. Johnson (ed), *Making histories: studies in history-writing and politics* (London, 1982), pp. 253–302.
[104] *Parl Pap.* (1982/83), HC 9, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Annual Report 1981–82, pp. 7, 12.
[105] 'The romantic heritage that must not crumble away', *Times* (7 Nov. 1980), p. 14; 'The Achievement of Canons Ashby', *Country Life* (26 Feb. 1981), p. 488.
[106] 'Wanted: a stately home tax loophole', *Times* (25 Nov. 1985), p. 14.
[107] 'The Future of Belton House', *Country Life* (12 May 1983), p. 1226.

Fund's 'ability to fulfil precisely the purpose for which it was created'.[108] In the same year, they came to the aid of several historic houses in Scotland, including Braco Castle, Finavon Castle, and Earlshall.

When the Fund faced financial difficulties, country houses took centre stage in discussions over further government funding. While the NHMF trustees were discussing the fate of Belton House, Calke Abbey in Derbyshire also faced an uncertain future. The trustees had prioritised Belton House after consultation with the NT, leaving them with insufficient funds to direct towards Calke Abbey. Nevertheless, the NHMF lobbied the government for supplementary funds that would enable the NT to purchase Calke Abbey too; the additional funding (£6.3 million; £4.5 million of it earmarked for Calke Abbey) was announced in the Budget statement of 13 March 1984.[109] This level of publicity for a decision to dedicate additional public funds to the purchase of an historic house was unprecedented, suggesting an assumption that government intervention to 'save' (previously) private heritage property was acceptable to the public. Moreover, the grant in question was significantly greater than the sum over which the battle for Mentmore (initially offered to the government at £2.2 million) had been fought. Marcus Binney's 'SAVE Britain's Heritage' credited their public campaign with the decision, and later reflected that this 'unprecedented singling out of a particular building was a spectacular triumph for SAVE who had demonstrated how the force of public opinion could be used to save fine historic buildings'.[110] In reality, the decision was made in the context of a greater willingness to fund historic houses in general. During the same financial year, the NHMF also committed to giving a total of £3.02 million to the NTS towards the purchase and endowment of Fyvie Castle.[111] They also injected £650,000 into the newly established charitable trust that was created to maintain Thirlestane Castle in Scotland. The owner ceded ownership to the Trust, but continued to live in

[108] HMSO, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Annual Report 1983–84 (London, 1984/85), p. 7.
[109] Ibid., pp. 8-9.
See: Hansard, HC Deb 13 March 1984, vol 56, cc75–6. The NHMF received an additional £1.3 million in the 1983–84 financial year, and £5 million for 1984–85 (in addition to the pre-arranged £3 million from the DOE and OAL). An additional £2 million was allocated to the acceptance of property in lieu.
[110] 'Calke Abbey, Derbyshire', SAVE Britain's Heritage, https://www.savebritainsheritage.org/achievement/item/16/Calke-Abbey-Derbyshire (23 Jan. 2020).
[111] HMSO, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Annual Report 1983–84 (London, 1984/85), p. 36.

a wing of the house.[112] Looking on all these grants in combination, the 'conservationist lobby' complained that Charteris had prioritised country houses and art above nature.[113] However, the extent of additional support that the NHMF gained from the government in assisting country houses indicates that it was not the influence of one man alone that ensured their receipt of the lion's share of funding.

The events of 1985 compounded the impression that Thatcher's government was predisposed to come to the aid of country houses. In March, the NHMF was given a supplementary grant of £25 million, specifically to deal with three historic houses that were newly endangered by outstanding transfer tax bills: Kedleston, Nostell Priory, and Weston Park.[114] The DOE deliberated over which houses to prioritise. Kedleston was considered the most important house, and heritage campaigners had looked on in trepidation since the second Lord Scarsdale's death in 1977, when the estate passed to his son. However, the DOE worried that any deal with the new owner, the third Lord Scarsdale, was 'likely to prove both messy and expensive'. By contrast, Lord Bradford at Weston Park had 'leaned over backwards' to offer the DOE a 'very reasonable deal'.[115] Meanwhile, Lord St Oswald hoped to settle his tax bill at Nostell Priory by offering an important set of Chippendale furniture (that had been made for the house, with surviving accounts) to the nation. Lord Gowrie, Minister of State for the Arts, put particular pressure on the DOE to ensure that the furniture was retained.[116] Eventually, it was decided that all three houses must be helped. Ownership of Weston Park was transferred to a charitable foundation, an arrangement that Patrick Cormack (then, as an MP, active in campaigning on behalf of historic houses) has described as what would have been 'the ideal outcome for Mentmore': an independent trust, with an injection of government money, that is now maintained as an events venue.[117] The NT took over the house, with an endowment fund mostly provided by

[112] Ibid., p. 10.
[113] 'Call the Fund Brigade', *Financial Times* (8 Aug. 1987), p. 10.
[114] *Historic Houses*, summer 1986, Historic Houses Archives, p. 27.
[115] 'Kedleston, Weston Park and Nostell Priory', 6 Feb. 1985, TNA, AT 45/63.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Interview with Patrick Cormack, conducted by Elena Porter, House of Lords, 1 May 2019; in the author's possession.

the NHMF, and enabled the Curzon family to live there rent-free. Upon receipt of the £25 million grant, the NHMF trustees had 'greatly increased confidence that this Government is sympathetic to the objective of providing adequate protection to our national heritage'.[118]

Despite the Thatcher government's general reluctance to offer government aid and intervention for privately owned historic houses, state aid expanded significantly in the 1980s due to these grants. Despite the intention that the NHMF would remove some of the administration of heritage funding to an arm's-length body, the DOE remained heavily involved in decision-making processes when multiple historic sites competed for the same funds. Due to the state's newly increased capability to secure the charitable acquisition of heritage sites, such dilemmas only became more frequent. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, state involvement with heritage grew under Thatcher.

A new political climate for the country house

The government expanded its involvement in historic buildings preservation even further with the creation of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England in 1983. This semi-public agency was soon known as English Heritage, and its creation is considered to be a major turning point for the heritage (or conservation) 'movement' in Britain. Miles Glendinning has claimed that it represented a reorientation of heritage towards tourism and capitalism.[119] While the break between the pre- and post-1983 government attitude towards heritage may not have been quite so stark, the creation of the new body certainly reflected a sea-change in attitudes towards heritage during the 1980s.

English Heritage assumed its full responsibilities in April 1984, combining the functions of the HBCs and the Department of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings (DAMHB),

[118] HMSO, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Annual Report, 1984–85 (London, 1985/86), p. 8.
[119] M. Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation: Antiquity to Modernity* (London, 2013), p. 358.

which were dissolved. Its remit covered maintaining the approximately 400 monuments that had been the responsibility of the DOE; making grants for monuments, historic buildings, conservation areas, and archaeology; advising owners and bodies responsible for monuments and buildings; providing educational facilities and facilitating research; and preserving historical records.[120] The DAMHB had been publicly criticised by the former Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments in January 1981, and was considered due for extensive reform.[121] The government's consultation paper of November 1981 explained that the creation of a quango was intended to enable more 'commercial and entrepreneurial flair' in running government-owned heritage tourist sites than a government department could achieve. It was part of the government's 'general aim to seek opportunities wherever possible to reduce the functions carried out by Government Departments where these could be carried out more effectively elsewhere'; i.e., to reduce the size of the civil service.[122] This was a watershed moment in the state's involvement in historic preservation: the surrender of some of the direct political controls previously within the purview of the DAMHB and of the notion that the government was responsible for deciding which historic houses ought to be 'saved'.

Edward Montagu was appointed as English Heritage's first chairman, firmly entrenching the interests of privately owned historic houses at the top of the body that was now the most powerful organisation in heritage. In his autobiography, Montagu noted that Jennifer Jenkins was the preferred candidate, but was considered inappropriate because she was married to Roy Jenkins, then leader of the Social Democratic Party.[123] Montagu also recorded that Thatcher's personal choice was Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who had practised as an architect before assuming royal duties on behalf of his cousin, Elizabeth II, in the early seventies. The Palace opposed the idea, because they felt the post entailed too much political involvement.[124] Ken

[120] 'A New Voice Clears its Throat: The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission', *Country Life* (19 Apr. 1984), p. 1070.
[121] Thurley, *Men from the Ministry*, p. 250.
[122] HMSO, Organisation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings in England: A Consultation Paper (London, 1981), p. 3.
[123] Montagu, *Wheels within Wheels*, p. 228.
[124] Ibid.

Robinson, the Managing Director of Beaulieu's visitor attractions at the time, recalled that Montagu's appointment was a 'brave move by government' because of his "commercial" attitudes towards heritage sites.[125] However, it did not arouse criticism from the press, despite Montagu's clear vested interests in a particular form of heritage as the founding President of the HHA. He was merely one among an aristocratic or upper-class line-up of leaders across heritage, including Lord Gowrie in the Office of Arts and Libraries and Martin Charteris at the NHMF. The *Guardian* commented that Montagu 'probably knows more about the heritage business than anyone'.[126]

English Heritage was intended to be more assertive than the Historic Buildings Councils, and—as Patrick Cormack has reflected—it was.[127] When the government withdrew its proposal to impose VAT on listed building alterations, it was largely down to pressure from English Heritage.[128] They were also vocal in criticising the 'totally unsatisfactory' VAT charges on repairs to historic buildings generally, something that the HHA had been campaigning against for years.[129] Indeed, English Heritage was so concerned about the effects of tax that it planned to establish its own Tax Group after fewer than two years of operation.[130]

By the middle of the decade, it appeared that an effective public safety net had been established for country houses. The general expansion of state apparatus in relation to heritage (through the creation of two key arm's length government agencies) had indirectly strengthened the position of private house owners. The threatened houses that campaigners had deemed 'important' had all been saved, and the financial position of many historic house owners was improving. It was widely acknowledged that it was now much easier for historic estates to survive CTT due upon inheritance than it had been in the mid-1970s. For instance, it was no secret that part of the reason for Calke Abbey's precarious status in 1983 was the owners' ignorance of

[125] Interview with Ken Robinson, conducted by Elena Porter, Historic Houses Association (Chester Street), 15 Feb. 2019.
[126] 'The lord of the manor sets up house', *Guardian* (28 Dec. 1983), p. 11.
[127] Interview with Patrick Cormack, conducted by Elena Porter, House of Lords, 1 May 2019.
[128] HHA AGM 1984 minutes, Historic Houses Archives, p. 2.
[129] HMSO, Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Commission for England Report and Accounts 1983–85, (London, 1985/86), p. 28.
[130] Ibid.

potential tax concessions.[131] The HHA conceded that, with 'sensitive interpretation of the legislation introduced over the past ten years', there 'were other houses that had been able to survive and flourish without spectacular publicity'. These included Doddington Hall and Thirlestane Castle.[132] Much of the heritage bodies' work in the first few years of the 1980s was focused on making historic house owners aware of advantages that already existed. The NHMF Committee noted that they had been involved in several sales of works of art from historic properties in which the vendors had been ignorant of the benefits of private treaty sales.[133] This was changing rapidly. The Waverley Committee noted that during 1 July 1981–30 June 1982 they had considered fewer cases than in any of the previous fifteen years. They attributed this to a growing awareness of the advantages of selling directly to public institutions.[134] Moreover, the income tax reductions of 1979 and (especially) 1988 eased the burden of maintenance. Giles Worsley has claimed that, with their newfound disposable cash in the 1980s, owners were able to 'pour' money into the maintenance of their houses.[135] This was not true for all owners, but the economic conditions of the eighties did benefit some historic house owners enormously, and especially those with disposable art assets.

Nevertheless, 'crises' of country house preservation were still occurring, and lobbyists—alongside the NHMF's trustees—were quick to highlight that reliance on emergency funds was unsustainable. It would not be possible for the DOE to generate another grant on the scale it had provided for Kedleston by making internal savings, as they had done in that instance.[136] The HHA continued to emphasise the long-term impracticality of both public acquisition of historic houses and NT acquisition (the more frequent outcome in these years). In the Association's 1984 AGM, President Saunders Watson noted that 'Calke Abbey and Belton House represented success stories for the nation, but not necessarily for the HHA, whose aim was to create conditions in

[131] 'Why private inheritance becomes national heritage', *Times* (23 Jan. 1984), p. 4.
[132] HHA AGM 1984 minutes, p. 1.
[133] *Parl Pap.* (1982/83), HC 9, p. 3.
[134] *Parl Pap.* (1982/83), Cm 8814, Export of Works of Art 1981–82, p. 1.
[135] G. Worsley, 'Beyond the Powerhouse: Understanding the Country House in the Twenty-first Century', *Historical Research*, 78/201 (2005), p. 424.
[136] 'Kedleston Hall, Weston Park and Nostell Priory', 20 Feb. 1985, TNA, AT 45/63.

which private owners could continue to live in and manage their properties'.[137] Moreover, the examples of Kedleston, Weston, and Nostell Priory demonstrated that there was inadequate provision for the acceptance in lieu procedure without 'emergency' allocation of additional public funds. Saunders Watson claimed that these apparent success cases masked wider problems with the existing financial provisions for heritage property.[138] The *Economist* drew attention to the problem in its overview of the precarious situation of most historic houses, highlighting that the Treasury had concluded agreements on only twenty-eight of the 123 applications for exemption they had received in the previous nine years.[139]

While the larger, more profitable, open houses benefited significantly from tax relief during the 1980s, the majority of country houses—which were often described as 'smaller'—were not so advantaged. The *Spectator* described the tax system as 'particularly loaded against the smaller seats of the squires as opposed to the stately showplaces'.[140] The HHA shared this view, which was corroborated by a report on the profitability of open country houses that was produced in 1983 by the Professor of Estate Management at the University of Reading, Charles Miles. He reported that 'most houses' showed a deficit after opening; many made a loss even before charging for management staff.[141] The book produced from his research, *Running an Open House: A guide to the public opening of houses*, was an introductory-level overview of what was involved in opening a house to the public. It is revealing in itself that such a book—which, unlike its forerunners from the likes of Edward Montagu, was not otherwise entertaining—was published. It reflected the wider professionalisation of the business of running historic houses as tourist attractions, as did the proliferation of university courses on estate and land management (such as the one on which he taught). Miles joined the many voices across the heritage sector, including English Heritage, the NHMF and the HHA, in claiming that the existing taxation system was working against the preservation of historic houses. If the government *was* willing to produce

[137] HHA AGM 1984 minutes, p. 1.
[138] *Historic House*, spring 1985, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[139] 'The stately homes of England: How wobbly they stand', *Economist* (21 Jul. 1984), p. 73.
[140] 'The Last of the Squires?', *Spectator* (31 Jul. 1982), p. 16.
[141] Charles W. N. Miles, *Running an Open House: A guide to the public opening of houses* (London, 1986), p. 2.

emergency funds to 'rescue' a threatened house, they asked, why was it unwilling to make the legislative changes that would make such a position far less likely?

A new pattern of lobbying

By the early 1980s, the HHA were well-practised and well-connected lobbyists. In his autobiography, Michael Saunders Watson (the then President) recalled that 1983–4 had been formed of a 'seemingly endless stream of conferences and regional meetings'.[142] By this time, the HHA had Tourism Development, Taxation, and Succession committees, and its operations expanded as its responsibilities to its house and visitor members (known as 'Friends') grew. There were nine regional groups, and the chairmen of the regions were largely responsible for recruitment of 'Friends' and lobbying at a local level, with a particular focus on local authorities.[143]

The HHA focused its lobbying efforts on convincing the civil service of the necessity of policy alterations that would gradually accumulate to make the financial position of the country house owner viable. It was this method that enabled the HHA to win small concessions in the early 1980s. These included new provisions for maintenance funds in the 1982 Finance Act, such as the ability to withdraw funds within the first six years of the settlement on the death of the settlor; the ability to set aside assets held in settlement on 'maintenance fund trusts' without first needing to distribute them to a beneficiary; and the inclusion of 'improvement' of a property among the approved uses for funds.[144] In March 1982, George Howard, HHA President, was able to say that the 'Conservative Government had devoted enormous time and effort to the intricate task of establishing revised regulations that were valid for the widely differing conditions of the

[142] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, p. 142.
[143] 'Summary record of the meeting of regional chairmen of the HHA', 26 Sep. 1984, Historic Houses Archives, p. 4.
[144] *Historic House*, summer 1982, Historic Houses Archives, p. 20.

whole range of historic houses'; but there was much more to be done.[145] Interestingly, in a foreword to a Debrett's book on the stately homes and their owners, published in the same year, Howard conceded that, 'In realistic terms, there is not a great deal more that government can do'.[146]

Accordingly, the HHA focused their efforts on improving the details of taxation and legislation affecting historic houses. They knew that the support of civil servants was vital in this arena. Saunders Watson cultivated friendships with many of the key Treasury and Inland Revenue officials. Leonard Beighton, Ian Spence, and Robin McConnochie, who all worked in the Policy Division of the Inland Revenue, brought their families to stay at Rockingham Castle. Saunders Watson recalled in his memoir that as 'the years passed and Governments came and went, this relationship with the Revenue continued and was one I greatly valued'; their mutual understanding was 'an enormous help in funding a practical solution to the many problems that arose'.[147] Saunders Watson and McConnochie, Assistant Secretary in the Policy Division, soon developed a pattern of meeting informally, one-on-one.[148] In the Treasury, Peter Rees, who had been sympathetic to the HHA for several years, became Chief Secretary in June 1983. At the HHA's 1984 AGM on 20 November, Rees praised the HHA as a 'considerable force which politicians ignore at their peril'.[149]

Internal correspondence between the Treasury and Inland Revenue demonstrates that officials consistently suggested adopting a strategy of providing the HHA with enough concessions to placate them, and the HHA were correspondingly consistent in asking for concessions that were both (theoretically) achievable and extensive. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury was 'particularly impressed with their obviously good relationship with Revenue officials' and found them well-informed of the government's priorities.[150] In a briefing of late

[145] 'Seminar on Heritage Objects, held on Tuesday 23 March 1982', Historic Houses Archives.
[146] Lord Howard of Henderskelfe, *Debrett's the Stately Homes of Britain* (London, 1982), foreword.
[147] Saunders Watson, *I am Given a Castle*, pp. 105–6.
[148] Ibid.
[149] 'Copy of the Chief Secretary of the Treasury's speech given to the HHA AGM [1984]', High Wardington House.
[150] Letter from A. P. Hudson (Treasury) to Houghton (Inland Revenue), 3 Feb. 1984, TNA, IR 40/19604.

1984 for a meeting with the HHA, the Treasury discussed which amendment to the legislation might be the best candidate if it was considered 'desirable to meet at least one of the heritage lobby's points in this year's Bill'.[151] As the Secretary of State for the Environment who followed Heseltine, Patrick Jenkin, noted in November 1983, the 'good relations' Michael Saunders Watson and Jeremy Benson had established with the Inland Revenue had 'resulted in better arrangements in capital taxation and maintenance funds', which he claimed were now 'very attractive to owners'.[152] Benson was a member of the HBC for England at this time, and therefore embedded in the government's preservation machinery. The influence of these key individuals, who were able to devote time that was equivalent to a full-time job to the HHA, unpaid, was recognised as essential in securing policy change.[153]

The HHA felt that continued pressure was needed to improve the application of special financial measures for historic house owners; there had been substantial changes to conditional exemption and heritage maintenance funds (HMFs) since they were introduced in 1975/6, but these changes had not yet been substantially tested for effectiveness. A letter from Saunders Watson to Chancellor Nigel Lawson on 12 October 1983 explained that while capital taxation changes of recent years were 'now in broad terms very satisfactory', there were still problematic details of the legislation that required correction. These included the fifteen per cent surcharge on HMF income and the application of Value Added Tax.[154] In March 1983, only thirty enquiries about HMFs had been received, and only five funds had actually been established.[155] When the Earl Spencer set one up for Althorp from the proceeds of a sale of two gold wine coolers in January 1982, he complained that the Treasury had been 'dilatory' in advising him on the process.[156] The changes of 1982 increased uptake, and by March 1993 eighty-four HMFs had

[151] 'Points made by HHA in letter to Chancellor', undated, TNA, IR 40/19604, p. 6.
[152] '10th annual AGM, 22 Nov 1983, Speech by Mr. Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment', Historic Houses Archives, p. 9.
[153] In conversation with the author on 14 January 2020, Elizabeth Banks, Michael Saunders Watson's sister, described Saunders Watson's work for the HHA as equivalent to a full-time job.
[154] Letter from Michael Saunders Watson (HHA President) to Leonard Beighton (Inland Revenue), 18 Oct. 1983, TNA, IR 40/19604.
[155] J. Cornforth, *The Country Houses of England 1948–1998* (London, 1998), p. 114.
[156] 'Princess's father chides Treasury', *Sunday Telegraph* (24 Jan. 1982), p. 3.

been set up,[157] but (as Cornforth reflected in 1998) many owners were still reluctant to establish them due to fears that they would be unable to uphold the thirty-day access requirements indefinitely.[158] Another issue that remained after 1982 was the continued application of stamp duty to the funds. As Saunders Watson explained in his aforementioned letter to Lawson, this acted as a further deterrent to their uptake.[159] The HHA's established strategy of lobbying for small changes to existing provisions for historic house owners paid off in this instance. After extensive discussions between the HHA, Treasury, and Inland Revenue, maintenance funds for historic buildings became exempt from stamp duty under the Inheritance Tax Act of 1984.[160]

Despite small concessions, the Thatcher government held to their position that their general overhaul of the capital taxation system ought to enable historic house owners to maintain their houses, provided they acted prudently. At the HHA's 1983 AGM, Patrick Jenkin (Secretary of State for the Environment) reiterated the government's policy line that, while historic houses were best maintained in private ownership, concessions were unnecessary when the government was 'pursuing a general economic policy which will benefit HHA members'.[161] The Thatcher government reduced income tax substantially, and the top rate saw the most dramatic reduction: from eighty-three per cent (1979) to forty per cent (1988).[162] The HHA argued that this general reduction could not compensate for historic house owners' inflated maintenance costs, which they estimated at four-and-a-half times the cost of maintenance to a non-listed building (in 1983).[163] Their suggestions that this problem might be solved by guaranteed tax relief on maintenance expenditures up to a certain figure, dependent on the 'quality' of the building and its level of

[157] HHA internal letter to Tax Committee, 'Heritage maintenance funds', undated, Rockingham: Box 12-A.
N.B. John Cornforth reported a higher number (without citation) in *The Country Houses of England*, p. 114: 110 funds as of November 1986, 82 of which were 'in life'.
[158] Cornforth, *Country Houses of England,* p. 114.
[159] Letter from Michael Saunders Watson to Leonard Beighton.
[160] Inheritance Tax Act 1984, part II, chapter I, section 27, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1984/51/section/27/1998-07-31 (11 May 2022).
[161] 'Speech by Mr Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment', 22 Nov. 1983, Historic Houses Archives.
[162] In the new government's first budget in 1979, the top rate was cut to sixty per cent, where it remained until the 1988 budget. See: B. Jackson and R. Saunders, 'Introduction: Varieties of Thatcherism', in B. Jackson and R. Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 15.
[163] 'The stately homes of England: How wobbly they stand'.

public access, were met in late 1984 with the statement that 'the tax system is not a suitable vehicle for providing assistance; the present system of grants is a more efficient method of channelling available resources'.[164]

The most significant fiscal changes for historic house owners under Thatcher were those brought in by the 1986 Budget. Nigel Lawson's Budget greatly reduced taxation of capital overall, and substantially altered the tax regime that Labour had put in place in 1975/6. Lawson's new Inheritance Tax (IHT), which came into effect on 18 March 1986, could be avoided altogether if wealth was passed on more than seven years before death. If the transferrer did not survive for seven years after the transfer, conditional exemption of heritage property still applied, and tax was applied on a sliding scale. Combined with the abolition of lifetime CTT, this meant that avoiding taxation of big estates became significantly easier, provided that an owner remained in good (or at least predictable) health.[165] The HHA welcomed the change, and in November 1986 President Saunders Watson wrote to Nigel Lawson expressing thanks that IHT would 'undoubtedly make it easier for many of our members to pass property on to the next generation'.[166]

In 1988, Lawson improved the situation for private historic house owners further by levelling rates of IHT at forty per cent and raising its threshold from £90,000 to £110,000. In March, *Country Life* magazine described the Chancellor as 'a good countryman', referring to these changes and to his abolition of CGT on the 'purely inflationary gains of 1965–1982, which in the past have borne heavily on families farming their own land'.[167] The cuts were criticised by the left as pandering to the rich, but Lawson noted that the expected yield of IHT in 1987–88 was over £1 billion, representing an increase in real terms of almost fifty per cent compared to 1978–79.[168] Nevertheless, Lawson's introduction and alteration of IHT was a significant aid to the majority of country house owners. Looking back on his own attempts to advocate for heritage in

[164] 'Points made by HHA in letter to Chancellor', TNA, IR 40/19604, p. 6.
[165] See J. Rentoul, *The Rich Get Richer: The Growth of Inequality in Britain in the 1980s* (London, 1987), p. 156.
[166] Letter from Saunders Watson to Nigel Lawson, 17 Nov. 1986, Beaulieu, Box 244.
[167] 'The Chancellor as a Good Countryman', *Country Life* (24 Mar. 1988), p. 118.
[168] Hansard, HC Deb 17 March 1987, vol 112, c826.

Parliament, and as a member of the All-Party Group for Heritage, Conservative MP Patrick Cormack remembered Lawson as 'one of the most helpful Chancellors'.[169]

However, Lawson's changes did not please all estate owners. Lord Courtenay of Powderham Castle certainly felt that the new tax was a step backwards. In a letter to his local MP on 26 June 1989, Courtenay wrote that he wished 'to disabuse the Treasury Ministers of the notion that by replacing CTT with Inheritance Tax they did us all a favour', explaining that he viewed IHT as 'a totally retrograde step' that 'took us right back to the bad old days of Estate Duty'. Like Estate Duty, IHT could be avoided upon a successful gamble. As Courtenay put it:

> If you have to tax capital at all it is far better to tax it at an affordable rate which can be anticipated rather than a capricious tax at a punitive rate which can be avoided if you are clever enough or lucky enough.[170]

Courtenay's experience of IHT as a 'capricious tax' was not shared by all historic house owners. When John Cornforth reflected on the introduction of IHT in 1998, he judged that it had given families greater scope to plan for the future. Cornforth noted that the introduction of a sliding scale on duties incomplete within the seven-year period gave owners a new confidence that they had not had under CTT.[171] Nevertheless, the quick succession of differing tax regimes made family finances increasingly complex for many estates.

Owners whose wealth was secured in charitable trusts were among those most negatively affected by the 1986 Finance Bill. Currey and Co., the Duke of Devonshire's solicitors, complained to the *Financial Times* that the new tax regime would 'operate arbitrarily and unfairly on families who have been influenced to order their lives by principles clearly laid down by this and previous governments'.[172] In his 1987 book *The Rich Get Richer*, John Rentoul summarised the change in his comment that, although the burden of IHT was much lighter than CTT, the 'old rich, with family money tied up in trusts' did least well out of the change, and may have ended up paying more'.[173] The abolition of CTT on lifetime gifts to individuals had not been extended

[169] Interview with Patrick Cormack, conducted by Elena Porter, House of Lords, 1 May 2019.
[170] Quoted in A. J. Jackson, 'Rural Property Rights and the Survival of the Landed Aristocracy in the Late Twentieth Century' (PhD thesis, University College London, 1998), p. 116.
[171] Cornforth, *Country Houses of England*, p. 126.
[172] 'Inheritance Tax and Trusts', *Financial Times* (21 May 1986), p. 23.
[173] Rentoul, *The Rich Get Richer*, p. 157.

to lifetime gifts to and from family trusts, which were still taxed. This put the trustees of charitable trusts in a similar position to those who had established discretionary trusts before 1975.

When CTT was introduced in 1975, it was charged on transfers into and out of discretionary trusts. Subsequently, charitable trusts replaced discretionary trusts as the most popular means of protecting an estate in trust; the former offered lower taxation in exchange for less direct benefit to the family. Reportedly, the Marquess of Exeter halted plans to establish a discretionary trust in favour of a charitable trust after the 1975 Finance Bill. When he died in 1981, Burghley House, contents of the state apartment, and income-generating land was passed to this trust.[174] The Chatsworth House Trust, another charitable trust in which ownership of the house was vested, had been established in 1981.[175] In both cases, the family continued to live in the house and paid rent to the trust. Few such trusts had been established to own or support country houses by the 1990s, as they required the family to be financially independent of the assets associated with the estate. Moreover, the owners needed to convince the government that the maintenance of the house was of undeniable public benefit. In 1998, Cornforth stated that there were now 'over thirty' charitable trusts and, in an HHA-funded publication, Sayer and Massingberd stated that 'about 20 are known to the Historic Houses Association' in 1992.[176]

* * *

Despite the HHA's concerns about hostile Labour governments in the 1970s, and the Conservative Party's repeated pronouncements that private house owners should not receive further concessions, the private country house owner's overall financial and political position improved dramatically between 1977 and 1989. The sale of Mentmore Towers had prompted an internal reorganisation of the way in which the government responded to 'threatened' country

[174] 'Keeping it in the family', *Times* (16 Apr. 1985), p. 12.
[175] 'Chatsworth House Trust', https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/?regid=511149&subid=0 (7 Jan. 2021).
[176] Cornforth, *Country Houses of England*, p. 284; M. Sayer and H. Montgomery-Massingberd, *The Disintegration of a Heritage* (Norwich, 1993), p. 95.

houses, resulting in greatly enhanced funding for country house preservation through the NHMF. Moreover, the episode proved that Callaghan's government—and, to a greater extent, civil servants within the DOE—had fully accepted the notion that the separation of a house and its 'historically associated' contents qualified as matter of significant national concern. This sentiment would carry through to subsequent governments.

Thatcher's governments consistently improved country house owners' financial situation, through both general changes to the tax regime and consistent small improvements to existing special arrangements like HMFs. The HHA's excellent working relationship with the Treasury and Inland Revenue was essential in securing the small improvements. Ministers may have stuck to the official line that historic house owners required no further help, but they supported the enhancement of existing concessions behind the scenes. In terms of general taxation policy, the ability to avoid IHT on a house completely under the seven-year rule, without the access commitments tied to conditional exemption of heritage property (as introduced in 1975), was an enormous advantage of the successor to CTT. Conditional exemption remained an option for owners of 'historically significant' houses, but it was now possible to bypass it completely. The Conservative Party's continuation of the exemptions that had been enacted under Labour before 1979 set a precedent for the long-term protection of those exemptions, enabling them to continue as the foundation of private historic house preservation.

As the HHA's Taxation Committee reported in 1985, Conservative members believed that 'the heritage had done pretty well out of [their] government'.[177] When the Conservative Party were elected for a third term in 1987, retaining their large majority, the HHA saw it as 'the opportune moment to get on close terms' with the Labour Party, and quickly arranged to meet with Tony Blair, then a member of the shadow team for Trade and Industry.[178] While the HHA lobbied for change, their house members also valued consistency to enable long-term planning: cross-party consensus on privately owned built heritage was crucial.

[177] 'HHA Taxation Sub-Committee Agendas and Minutes 1985–1989', High Wardington House.
[178] 'HHA Taxation Committee minutes, 25 June 1987', High Wardington House, p. 5.

Without the ability to rally behind a 'crisis' as they had done in the mid-1970s, it was more difficult for the HHA to convince ministers of the necessity of their requests by the end of the decade. In September 1988, the HHA's Taxation Committee noted that they 'recognised that this government might be prepared to allow a major heritage failure without a rescue'.[179] Two years later, in 1990, it was noted in an HHA Finance and Policy Committee meeting that 'ministers were bored with the Association and its constant lobbying'.[180] Although, as Patrick Cormack has reflected, the HHA may not have had 'any real enemies or opponents in government since the early seventies',[181] they had also ceased to have many staunch supporters.

[179] 'Taxation committee minutes', 29 Sep. 1988, High Wardington House, p. 4.
[180] 'Meeting minutes 8 April 1990', High Wardington House.
[181] Interview with Patrick Cormack, conducted by Elena Porter, House of Lords, 1 May 2019.

Chapter Five

The final country house crises? A renaissance for treasure houses in the 1980s

While the Thatcher government strengthened existing arrangements for country house owners in taxation policy, owners were further advantaged by a growing cultural interest in their houses. On the surface, there was no place for the aristocracy in the apparent binaries of Thatcherism: in the industrious vs the idle; the people vs the liberal Establishment.[1] However, while Thatcherism resisted class-based allegiances, Thatcher's personal views towards aristocrats were unclear; this served both Thatcher and aristocrats well. Nicholas Coleridge, then editor of fashion magazine *Harpers & Queen*, wrote that the aristocracy had fared 'supremely well' under Thatcherism. He went so far as to predict that 'far from being dignified and good-natured brakes on government policy, the aristocracy will be marked out by history as Mrs Thatcher's greatest allies and beneficiaries' and claimed that fifteen great estates were in the process of buying back estate cottages they had sold in the 1970s.[2]

As historian Brian Harrison has put it, a combination of growing disposable income and enhanced awareness of its cultural and economic importance enabled 'old money' to regain its self-confidence in the 1980s.[3] Thatcher's economic policies and a renewed interest in (what were criticised as) 'nostalgic' depictions of Britain's past transformed the experience of maintaining a country house for many private owners. However, nostalgia was a double-edged sword. Theories of decline, or declinism, attributed the British economy's failure to adapt to global industrialization, and thus relative decline from its c. 1870 apogee of industrial performance, to a 'profound economic, but also political, social and cultural malaise'.[4] Arguments that assumed the

[1] Lawrence and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite discuss the shift in rhetoric related to class under Thatcher in J. Lawrence and F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher and the decline of class politics' in B. Jackson and R. Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 134.
[2] 'Why the Lords love the Lady', *Spectator* (22 Oct. 1988), p. 9.
[3] B. Harrison, *Finding a Role?: The United Kingdom 1970–1990* (Oxford, 2010), p. 137.
[4] J. Tomlinson, 'Thrice Denied: 'Declinism' as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20/2 (2009), pp. 227–251.

reality of decline pervaded historical discussion in the 1960s, and were adopted in various forms in the work of influential historians in subsequent decades.[5]

Keith Joseph and Nigel Lawson, two key Cabinet ministers, are known to have promoted declinist theses.[6] Joseph, to whom Thatcher looked for intellectual guidance, is thought to be behind the prime minister's conviction that the economic and political problems of the 1970s were a culmination of a century of national decline.[7] Joseph famously found the American academic Martin Wiener's 1981 thesis on decline so convincing that he gave every cabinet minister a copy of Wiener's book, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*. Wiener argued that decline had begun in the mid-nineteenth century and resulted in a loss of dynamism that was partly caused by a yearning for a rural Arcadia.[8] Most significantly for the contemporary image of country houses, subsequent declinist theorists identified the commercialisation of the sites and lifestyles that represented the height of the British Empire as an important facet of decline. A historical perspective that heavily influenced Conservative cabinet ministers was therefore one that identified 'heritage'—and, with it, the country house—with Britain's decline.

Connecting the political perception of decline to the popularity of country houses as tourist sites and in popular culture in 1987, Robert Hewison argued that the heritage industry was stifling British culture.[9] Hewison claimed that the preservation of country houses had become a method of perpetuating conservative values: their opening to the public reinforced hierarchy, a 'sturdy individualism on the part of their owners', privilege tempered by social duty, and a deference and respect for the social order.[10] He partly blamed Thatcherism for the success of the heritage industry, arguing that Thatcher used nostalgia as a political tool.[11] There was therefore a

[5] G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 161–163.
[6] B. Harrison, 'Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5/2 (1994), p. 237.
[7] D. Cannadine, 'Apocalypse when? British politicians and British 'decline' in the twentieth century' in P. Clarke and C. Trebilcock (eds), *Understanding decline: perceptions and realities of British economic performance* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 276.
[8] M. J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 6.
[9] R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987).
[10] Ibid., p. 53.
[11] Ibid., p. 47.

tension between the Thatcherite view of Britain's decline, which was accompanied by negative associations with the aristocracy, and Thatcherism's association (among left-wing critics) with the success of the heritage industry.

As this chapter will show, increasing interest in country houses, their collections, and even their owners, overpowered associations with decline in the 1980s—although it could not overpower cultural associations with conservatism. Crucially, as country houses and their collections accrued both monetary and cultural value internationally, the government was forced to acknowledge the full extent of their value to the British economy, and adjust policy accordingly.

The country house's cultural renaissance?

There was a renewed interest in the aesthetics and pastimes associated with country house life from the late-1970s. The posthumous publication of Edith Holden's book of notes, paintings, and excerpts of poetry under the title *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* was an enormous success; the book remained at the top of the *Sunday Times* bestseller list for sixty-four weeks.[12] Raphael Samuel has credited the book's popularity with driving the 'country house style' in interior design in the 1970s and 1980s, describing it as having 'set a fashion in herb- or flower-sprigged 'country' kitchens, and confirmed *broderie anglaise* as a more or less mandatory decorative frill'.[13] In fashion, this enthusiasm for countryside motifs found an outlet in the Victoriana-inspired floral dresses of the Laura Ashley brand, which represented 'the urban imagination's idealisation of rural fashion and experience' according to fashion historian Susanna Cordner.[14] Diana Spencer, whom Prince Charles married in 1981, helped to popularise this

[12] S. Edwards, '"That Honeysuckle Rose will soon Encircle the Globe": A Reception History of The Country Diary of an Edwardian lady', *Critical Matrix*, 14/1 (2003), pp. 105–130.
[13] R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994), p. 66.
[14] 'The frills are alive! The unexpected return of the Laura Ashley look', *Guardian* (2 May 2019), https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2019/may/02/laura-ashley-look-1970s-style-frills-flowers (6 Nov. 2021).

sartorial style. She had grown up at Althorp House in Northamptonshire and was the epitome of a new category of young woman: the 'Sloane Ranger', identified with conservatism and an interest in the 'traditional' aristocratic pursuits of privileged rural life.

An interest in enjoying the 'country house lifestyle' was not confined to old money; Richard Vinen has gone so far as to claim that the new generation of Oxbridge-educated bankers in the mid-1980s had 'sometimes acquired a fascination with wealth by watching the television series based on that supreme celebration of aristocratic values, *Brideshead Revisited*, in 1981'.[15] In that enduringly popular adaptation, Castle Howard featured as Brideshead, the romanticised country house at the heart of the novel. Criticising both what he perceived as the general public's tendency to pander to the aristocracy and landowners' strong presence in Thatcher's cabinet in 1989, a *Daily Mail* journalist wrote of the damaging effects of the 'Brideshead myth', that 'the aristocracy are beautiful, cultured, and an ornament to society (and that, therefore, we should be proud of them)'.[16] Merchant Ivory films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as *Maurice* (1987), which featured Wilbury Park in Wiltshire, contributed to this notion of the ornamental aristocracy. They cultivated an ideal of 'Englishness' that was tied to the aristocracy and their glamorous country house lifestyles. The films, and others that followed their example, became successful enough to be classified as their own genre: heritage films. Typically set in a southern English, middle- or upper-class past, they were often adapted from classic fiction such as the works of Evelyn Waugh and E. M. Forster.[17]

The use of country houses as film and television locations became an increasingly important revenue stream for private owners and had the added advantage of boosting visitor numbers. In his summer 1984 presidential report for the *Historic House* magazine, Michael Saunders Watson noted that Rockingham Castle was experiencing record crowds, no doubt due to the publicity resulting from the recent TV series 'By the Sword Divided', which used the castle

[15] R. Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s* (London, 2010), p. 192.
[16] 'At last we know, it's toff at the top', *Daily Mail* (31 Aug. 1989), p. 26.
[17] C. Monk, 'The heritage film debate revisited' in C. Monk and A. Sargeant (eds) *British Historical Cinema: the history, heritage and costume film* (London, 2002), p. 178.

as a filming location.[18] Knebworth House constantly sought rentals from filming companies as an important source of income, and nine films used it as a location during the 1980s alone, together with many television shows, music videos, and rock concerts in that decade.[19] Responding to demand, the HHA began to produce tailored advice for their members. For example, Norman Hudson (their retained Technical Advisor) strongly advised house owners to charge the HHA's suggested facility fees, writing that it had been 'a long, hard struggle to get facility fees for house locations up to the present levels which hirers have now come to expect', and warning that, 'While "scabs" or "blacklegs" may not be appropriate terminology, it is certainly true that anyone who accepts less than the suggested minimum, does damage to everybody'.[20] In using the language of the Trades Unions, Hudson underlined the necessity of owners acting in unison to protect filming as an income source for the entire sector. Such language would have appeared misplaced even a decade earlier; it demonstrated how rapidly the HHA had changed the landscape of commercial historic house opening since 1973, by creating their own version of a trade union of historic house owners.

Despite the prominence of country houses in film and television, many independently run country houses saw visitor numbers decline in the early 1980s, following rapid rises during the 1970s. In 1984, the *Economist* reported that visitor numbers to historic properties had been falling since 1978, and cited the results of a British Tourist Authority questionnaire in which 43% of a sample of owners stated that the recession was the main reason for fewer visitors in the summer of 1982.[21] However, they also noted the HHA's estimation that 1983 saw a 7% increase in visits to its medium-sized house members (defined as between 20,000 and 100,000 annual visitors), and an increase of 5% across all house members. Interestingly, houses that usually welcomed over 100,000 visitors experienced a slight drop overall. The HHA attributed these changes to the 'inconsistent British weather' and speculated that the increased spending power of the US dollar

[18] *Historic House*, summer 1984, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[19] See Chryssie Lytton Cobbold, *Board Meetings in the Bath: the Knebworth House Story* (London, 1986).
[20] *Historic House*, summer 1983, Historic Houses Archives, p. 37.
[21] 'The stately homes of England: How wobbly they stand', *Economist* (21 Jul. 1984), p. 72.

had contributed to increases in American visitors to the regions that they typically favoured—notably, Scotland.[22] Given that 40% of the then-open houses had opened for the first time during the 1970s,[23] the HHA ought not to have been surprised that their members experienced only a small overall rise in visitor numbers. In the winter 1984 edition of the HHA's magazine, President Saunders Watson noted that although attendance figures could 'only be seen as an indication of a pattern', those from 1984 seemed to show that 'the decline in attendances at members properties in the early '80s has at least been held in check'.[24] Some houses were disproportionately affected by the stagnating numbers. In her autobiography, Chrissie Lytton Cobbold remembered 1983 as a particularly difficult year for Knebworth House: visitor numbers had dropped from 120,000 to 24,000. She believed this was a result of both the recession and the greater competition from the opening of more nearby houses.[25]

Competition for visitors only increased throughout the 1980s as the open house market expanded. In their spring 1983 magazine, the HHA were able to tell their members that 'as far as paid admissions are concerned, it is the private properties that did least badly' between 1979 and 1981, and 'this is no doubt related to the fact that private properties gave the most emphasis to marketing'.[26] However, English Heritage's entry into the market in that same year necessitated a redoubling of the HHA's efforts to equip private historic house owners to compete with their increasingly corporate counterparts. The NT and English Heritage campaigned 'vigorously' to attract members and visitors to their sites, and at a regional chairmen meeting of the HHA in 1984 attendees voiced their concern that the private owner 'might be a bit squeezed'.[27] To address this problem, the HHA set up a Tourism Development Group in 1985, which was tasked with 'assisting members to maximise the revenue they could obtain from their properties by developing them to their individual potential'.[28] Around this time, the Association's Technical Advisor,

[22] *Historic House*, spring 1984, Historic Houses Archives, p. 9.
[23] 'The stately homes of England: How wobbly they stand'.
[24] *Historic House*, winter 1984, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[25] Lytton Cobbold, *Board Meetings in the Bath,* p. 191.
[26] *Historic House*, spring 1983, Historic Houses Archives, p. 33.
[27] 'Summary record of the meeting of regional chairmen of the HHA', 26 Sep. 1984, Historic Houses Archives, p. 4.
[28] 'HHA 1987 AGM minutes', High Wardington House.

Norman Hudson, compiled a travel trade manual for owners, to facilitate communication between travel trade operators and open historic houses.[29] The HHA played a key role in increasing house owners' awareness of marketing strategies and visitors' expectations when visiting historic sites, enabling open houses to draw larger crowds. A piece in the *Daily Telegraph* in December 1982 credited a 'more professional approach to marketing' with halting the 'recent decline in Britain's heritage industry during 1982'.[30] One of the major benefits of house membership to the Association was access to their seminars and planning resources that focused on making a success of commercial opening. For example, Hudson's regular 'casebook' feature in the Historic Houses magazine covered a wide array of practical matters, such as how to choose a security system or avoid dry rot, and further enabled owners to prepare for the potential pitfalls of running an open country house. Such support dramatically improved the situation for owners opening for the first time compared to only a decade before.

Although tourism was increasingly seen as the main solution for making maintenance of country houses viable, not all houses were well-placed to flourish within the tourism industry. The HHA highlighted the difficulties faced by 'smaller' houses, which typically had fewer resources for advertising and insufficient space to dedicate an area of the house to opening activities.[31] Some houses were able to circumvent this issue by taking a creative approach to money-making. From the early 1990s, newspaper and magazine features detailing the various enterprises undertaken to keep estates afloat became plentiful. Moniack Castle in Inverness-shire was 'basically saved' by its wine business, which the family started in 1979,[32] and Kentwell Hall in Suffolk was maintained by Tudor re-enactment and the income of its commercial barrister owner.[33] Corporate entertaining became the mainstay of many country houses in the early 1990s, 'offering higher income, with less wear and tear than you get from thousands of people trooping through' according to Thomas Ingilby of Ripley Castle.[34]

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[29] Ibid.
[30] 'Marketing skills halt decline in heritage 'industry'', *Daily Telegraph* (24 Dec. 1982), p. 6.
[31] Ibid.
[32] 'Mrs Fraser's Recipe for Success', *Times* (6 Nov. 1992), p. 32.
[33] 'There's no mocking the Tudors here', *Daily Telegraph* (12 Jun. 1993), p. xxxiii.
[34] 'The Country House Club', *Illustrated London News* (1 Jun. 1992), pp. 24–29.

Not all these new ventures paid off. Dodington Park was put up for sale when its owner, Sir Simon Codrington, had his plans for expanding the leisure facilities on site rejected by the local authority.[35] At Wolseley Hall the owners took a gamble on taking out an overdraft of £2.5 million to develop a ten-acre garden into a rose garden for tourists, but when the bank cut them off in December 1989 they drifted towards bankruptcy, and slowly sold off the estate in lots.[36] Finally, the house itself was repossessed in 2008.[37] In other cases, previously popular touristic sites took severe financial hits from a downturn in visitors. When the Powderham Estate ceased to bring in enough proceeds from tourism to run, the Courtenay family wound up their discretionary trust (which then became liable for tax) in 1982, in order to let the property.[38]

However, the Powderham Estate, alongside many other estates, benefited from the deregulation of planning controls that took place under Thatcher. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was the foundation of the UK's planning system, and it had introduced the requirement for planning permissions for land development.[39] Soon after taking power, Thatcher's government established the principle that planning permission should be granted unless there were 'sound and clear-cut reasons for refusal'.[40] Deregulation during the 1980s made it easier for country estate owners to develop their land for commercial purposes or to sell it to developers. The Courtenay family at Powderham sold three farmhouse complexes in the 1980s, for a combined price of £915,000. This approached the £1 million that Lord Courtenay required to wind up the trust, pay other debts on the estate, fund major repairs, and set up a maintenance fund.[41] The buyers of the first complex (in 1984) secured planning permission to convert it into residential and small business units, and the third complex was sold (in 1989) with permission to convert it into residential units.[42] As David Edgerton has summarised, the 'greatest and easiest

[35] 'Marketing skills halt decline in heritage 'industry''.
[36] *The Aristocracy: Survival of the Fittest*, dir. Sam Organ (TV programme, 19 Feb. 1997).
[37] 'Failure Is a Pretty Good Word for It …', *Daily Telegraph* (2 Apr. 2008), p. 27.
[38] A. Jackson, 'Rural Property Rights and the Survival of Historic Landed Estates in the Late Twentieth Century' (PhD thesis, University College London, 1998), pp.152–3.
[39] See: R. K. Home, 'Deregulating UK planning control in the 1980s', *Cities* 8/4 (1991), pp. 292–300.
[40] Ibid., p. 292.
[41] Jackson, 'Rural Property Rights', pp. 157–8.
[42] Ibid., p. 195.

rewards [in the 1980s] came from ownership of property, not work, much less building a business'.[43]

In order to raise even more capital, Courtenay began to sell objects from Powderham Castle. The high market value of antiques enabled the debts to be met through sales of only a few items, the most significant of which were the Channon bookcases sold in 1987 for £455,000. This sale was notable for several reasons; the first being that this was the highest price yet paid for a piece of English furniture in Britain; and secondly that this was the first sale of furniture in which the items were to remain *in situ*. The V&A purchased the bookcases at below market value, but the arrangement avoided capital gains tax. With this and other cash injections and the introduction of new management, the launch of new business ventures at Powderham made the house profitable in the early 1990s. The house was used as a corporate entertainment venue and reopened to the visiting public with more opening days and longer hours.[44] Opening alone had never been enough to remain financially afloat, but by the 1980s owners were fully alert to the necessity of taking a detached, commercial view of their house. They employed a vast range of newly available tools to do so.

[43] Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, p. 464.
[44] Jackson, 'Rural Property Rights', pp. 160–3.

The challenge of the art market

Arts and heritage funding was transformed by the art market boom of the 1980s. The result was a double-edged sword for country houses and their champions. In this new climate, those country houses best stocked with art were more easily able to keep afloat independently, but the government was more frequently unable to keep art objects it deemed part of the 'national heritage' within British borders. The sale of one Old Master painting could potentially garner enough cash to keep an historic house going for several years, but rising prices meant that public institutions in Britain often did not have the resources to compete on the open market.

The 1980s was an era of major arts cuts.[45] Previously free museums came under pressure to charge entrance fees in order to become less dependent on public funding. The V&A closed on Fridays following cuts in 1982.[46] University museums suffered particularly; when university grants were reduced in 1981, Oxford University's Ashmolean Museum was forced to close one day a week and stopped making purchases.[47] Following further cuts in 1989, the museum launched an appeal to raise £2.2 million in order to maintain its existing (reduced) operations. Cambridge University's Fitzwilliam Museum was only able to open half its galleries at any one time.[48] In this climate, museum directors claimed that they could not be expected to purchase export-stalled artworks with their minimal purchase grants. Simultaneously, it was the perfect time for country house owners to sell their art objects: the market was flourishing.

The process of reviewing works of art for export came under scrutiny as more and more country house 'treasures' left Britain for international collections. The criteria for granting and refusing export licences had remained static since 1952, when the first Waverley Committee was established. In order to require a licence, objects had to be valued above the relevant threshold

[45] See: 'Arts cuts could bring the house down', *Times* (21 Dec. 1980), p. 3; 'The arts have their politics', *Economist* (8 Jan. 1983), p. 19; 'More money, please', *Economist* (6 Sep. 1986), p. 96.
[46] 'Paying for the Arts', *Economist* (17 Nov. 1984), p. 15.
[47] 'The Ashmolean faces threat of closure', *Daily Telegraph* (25 Apr. 1987), p. 12.
[48] 'Crisis at the Colleges', *Financial Times* (17 Jun. 1989), p. ix.

for their categorisation and have been in Britain for a minimum of the previous fifty years.[49] Potential objects were assessed against the following criteria:

- Is it so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune?
- Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?
- Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?

In the Waverley Committee's early years, very few items were deemed to fit all three criteria and therefore refused an export licence. By the 1980s, the numbers of objects assessed by the Committee had increased dramatically. In 1957–58, five cases were referred to the Waverley Committee; in 1984–85, forty-three (down from forty-seven in the previous year).[50] In those same years the Committee received, respectively, 3,910 and 6,999 applications for export licences. To the dismay of many members of their Advisory Council, the Waverley Committee raised the bar below which objects did not require a licence to £16,000 from 1985–86, because the system could not cope with the number of licences needed.[51] Members objected that this would enable many objects of importance within categories that typically fetched lower prices, such as the decorative arts, to fall through the net. The Committee stuck to their decision on the grounds that the export control system should not be an 'all-embracing net'.[52]

When a collection of seventy-one Old Master drawings from Chatsworth were offered for sale by the Duke of Devonshire in 1984–5, it became evident that the Waverley Committee could not compensate for a lack of museum funding. The drawings included works attributed to Raphael, Leonardo, Rembrandt, and Mantegna, and the Duke of Devonshire had offered them to the government for £5.5 million.[53] The British Museum, which would have taken the drawings,

[49] Value thresholds ranged from £50 for a map, print or manuscript and £250 for furniture. See: *Parl Pap.* (1953/54), Cm 9292, Export of Works of Art, First Report of the Reviewing Committee Appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in December 1952, pp. 3–4.
[50] *Parl Pap.* (1957/58), Cm 542, Export of Works of Art 1957–58, p. 8; *Parl Pap.* (1984/85), Cm 9818, Export of Works of Art 1984–85, p. 8.
[51] This was a compromise; the board had originally suggested raising the minimum to £20,000. See: *Parl Pap.* (1984/85), Cm 9818, p. 5.
[52] Ibid., p. 4.
[53] 'Sell-out to the export market', *Daily Telegraph* (30 Jun. 1984), p. 9; 'Chatsworth art treasures export

valued them significantly lower (in consultation with Agnew's, a leading art dealer) and therefore rejected the offer. The drawings subsequently fetched £21 million at auction, leading to *BBC News* describing the auction as 'the sale of the century'.[54] The sale caused a furore among British art experts. Export licences for thirteen of the items were deferred by the Waverley Committee and all but one was subsequently granted, when British institutions failed to match the bids of American buyers (principally the Getty Museum).[55] The remaining drawing was a work attributed to Rembrandt, which the British Museum purchased for £668,160.[56] The *Times'* sale room correspondent Geraldine Norman wrote that the situation was 'a result of the first serious miscalculation by the National Heritage Memorial Fund'.[57]

Debates surrounding export restrictions were entangled with those surrounding the acceptance-in-lieu procedure. Owners were compelled to sell on the open market, some argued, because they knew that the acceptance in lieu of tax (AIL) system was slow and under-funded. Sayer and Massingberd claimed that an AIL case with provision to leave an item in situ in the early 1980s could involve up to twenty-seven separate administrative decisions.[58] They gave the famous example of Canova's *Three Graces*, which was sold from Woburn Abbey by the Marquess of Tavistock, son of the 13th Duke of Bedford, in the early 1980s. Woburn's sculpture was based on another sculpture of the Three Graces by Canova, made originally for Napoleon's first wife, Josephine, that John Russell, the 6th Duke of Bedford, saw in Canova's studio in Rome. Canova made a very similar piece for Bedford, who had a rotunda made specially to house it at Woburn. He called this 'the Temple of the Graces'. Tavistock offered the sculpture to the government in 1982, in exchange for a tax write-off of £1 million. He had recently taken over management of the Woburn estate after his father retired to Monaco, although the estate was still owned by a trust. Selling a few choice artworks became the most viable option to improve the

delayed', *Times* (9 Aug. 1984), p. 26.
[54] *The Aristocracy: Survival of the Fittest*.
[55] *Parl Pap.* (1984/85), Cm 9818, pp. 1–2; M. Sayer and H. Massingberd, *The Disintegration of a Heritage* (Norwich, 1993), p. 138.
[56] 'Nation saves only one 'Chatsworth'', *Daily Telegraph* (21 Dec. 1984), p. 10.
[57] 'One more bungle denting Britain's heritage', *Times* (5 Jul. 1984), p. 12.
[58] Sayer and Massingberd, *Disintegration of a Heritage*, p. 72.

(immediate) profitability of the estate when various different business ventures that he attempted failed. Negotiations between Tavistock and the government dragged on for two years, stalling on unresolved issues of valuation and access requirements, until Tavistock withdrew the offer.

The sculpture was sold to the Fine Art Investment and Display Trust (a company registered in the Cayman Islands) before it went on display at the *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition in 1985. It later returned to the market in 1989, finding a buyer in the Getty Museum for £7.6 million. However, the Waverley Committee deemed it too significant to leave the country. After several extensions to the deadline for British museums to match the Getty's offer, it was eventually purchased jointly by the V&A and the National Galleries of Scotland in 1994.[59] The V&A, National Galleries of Scotland, and NHMF had managed to raise £5.8 million towards the £7.6 million price tag, and their purchase had been secured by last-minute donations of £800,000 from Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza (a Dutch-born industrialist, resident in Switzerland) and John Paul Getty, Jr., son of the Getty Museum's founder.[60] Before this resolution, the episode had prompted the government to change the policy regarding matching offers. The Barclay twins, Scottish businessmen, offered to purchase the sculpture and loan it to the V&A for twenty-five years. In response, the government changed export policy to enable private sources to match the original sale price with no requirement that the piece be displayed to the public.[61] If the initial negotiations for AIL had been successful, the government might have saved itself the embarrassment of successive deadline extensions and the museums might have saved the resources expended in fundraising efforts.

Eventually, pressure to reform the AIL procedure was too great for the government to resist. Writing in *Country Life* and the *Daily Telegraph*, Godfrey Barker designated 1977–85 (in the former publication) and 1946–85 (in the latter) as 'the war of the philistines'. In his narrative, the Treasury attempted to stifle the AIL procedure, in pursuit of limiting public expenditure.[62]

[59] D. Littlejohn, *The Fate of the English Country House* (Oxford, 1997), p. 142.
[60] 'In Brief', *Economist* (10 Sep. 1994), p. 31.
[61] 'Three Graces to stay as export license is refused', *Financial Times* (5 May 1990), p. 22.
[62] 'Not as Safe as Houses', *Country Life* (24 Oct. 1984), p. 1280; 'Philistines at the Treasury', *Daily Telegraph* (23 Aug. 1985), p. 8.

The ceiling on acceptance was reduced to £4 million in 1983, and to £2 million in 1984. Charteris, Chairman of the NHMF, commented that this amount would enable the acceptance of between one quarter and one third of a Turner painting.[63] The reduction of AIL provision in real terms had come at a particularly unfortunate moment, he said: 'just as the top has blown off the art market'. He urged the end of notional reimbursement to the Treasury for tax lost through AIL objects.[64] Lord Annan, Chairman of the National Gallery, echoed this sentiment when he complained in a letter to the *Times* that Parliament's will regarding AIL was 'being thwarted and frustrated by the Treasury'.[65] Bowing to public pressure in July 1985, Lord Gowrie announced that AIL would operate as an open-ended charge on the contingency fund. The *Telegraph* hailed it as a wise decision that would yield the 'happiest results' with little cost—emphasising that it was not tax foreseeable that was lost, but tax foregone.[66] With the full weight of the art world coming to bear on the government, private owners benefited from better AIL terms that were designed to stymie the flow of British art abroad. Increasingly, their cause was linked in political thinking with that of the prosperity of the arts in Britain generally. As Charteris emphasised, the enormous draw of the country houses that housed a high proportion of British treasures was primarily in 'their being country houses and not museums'.[67] Influential figures from across the art world echoed this argument: the government could not help the arts without helping private country house owners.

Continual discussion of the threat of US institutions' ever-growing purchasing power in the press and within parliament further strengthened private owners' hands. The Getty Museum in Los Angeles was required to spend $90 million every year in order to maintain its charitable tax status, and it found that plenty of British country house owners were eager to sell.[68] The Museum soon became a target for criticism, as British newspapers teemed with articles reporting that the Getty threatened to take yet another piece of national heritage away from Britain. When the Getty attempted to purchase a painting of the crucifixion attributed to Duccio di Buoninsegna,

[63] Hansard, HL Deb 24 April 1985, vol 462, c1196.
[64] Ibid.
[65] 'Heritage', *Times* (25 Apr. 1985), p. 4.
[66] 'Lord Gowrie's Achievement', *Telegraph* (29 Jul. 1985), p. 12.
[67] HL Deb 24 April 1985, vol 462, c1196.
[68] 'One more bungle denting Britain's heritage', *Times* (5 Jul. 1984), p. 12.

Donald Wintersgill declared that the incident proved that the government's system to prevent the dispersal of national treasures was in urgent need of reform. He described the Getty Museum as the 'bogeyman of conservationists'.[69] In reality, the Getty Trust attempted to work with British institutions in attempts to avoid becoming the 'bogeyman', occasionally refraining from bidding on artworks to 'give Britain a chance'.[70] The Trust contributed over £100,000 towards conservation of objects belonging to British country houses when those objects were loaned to the National Gallery of Art in 1985.[71] Britain also benefited from Getty money via other channels. A donation of £400,000 from Paul Getty, Jr., who lived in Britain and regularly contributed to British arts institutions from the income he received from his father's estate, helped to ensure that the Duccio painting remained in Britain. Getty Jr. also donated a fund of £50 million to the National Gallery in instalments from 1985.[72] The journalist who reported on Getty's gift for the *Times* relayed fears that it would actually make the retention of Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi*—which had been bought by the Getty Museum in Malibu, and was awaiting an export licence while British galleries struggled to find the money to purchase it—harder to acquire, because the National Gallery did not intend to offer the full asking price for it.[73] Despite Getty's help, Britain could not afford to keep everything; the Mantegna went to Malibu.

The Treasure Houses of Britain

The threat of American money to the country house *ensemble* loomed larger than ever when an exhibition featuring the collections of British country houses was held in America's National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition took five and a half years of planning, with the expertise and administrative aid of the HHA and NT.[74] It ran for

[69] 'The art of selling one's heritage', *Guardian* (13 Mar. 1984), p. 17.
[70] 'National Gallery given £50m by Paul Getty', *Times* (14 Jun. 1985), pp. 1, 30.
[71] 'Getty to the rescue', *Times* (18 May 1985), p. 2.
[72] 'National Gallery given £50m by Paul Getty'.
[73] Ibid.
[74] 'A Gala for 'Treasure Houses of Britain'', *New York Times* (31 Oct. 1985), p. 10.

five months, from 3 November 1985 to 13 April 1986 (which was a month beyond its original end date, due to its popularity), and attracted almost a million visitors.[75]

The show was an enormous undertaking and investment for both the Gallery and the British institutions involved. The British Council co-ordinated conservation, packing and transport. The Council invested £7,000 in an IBM computer, and an additional £4,000 to train its operatives, to calculate the transport routes for some 750 objects from approximately 220 'treasure houses'. Between sixty and seventy per cent of the loaned objects required additional conservation in order to travel, and the required insurance was so large that the British and American governments stepped in to cover it.[76] The show was the largest exhibition ever mounted in the Gallery's West Wing, and involved the recreation of period fittings that the project manager described as tantamount to the erection of an entire building.[77] The whole thing was made possible by ample sponsorship from the Ford Motor Company.

The show was intended to be a landmark in country house scholarship, connecting objects that had never been seen together before in narratives of collecting and display. Signalling this intention, the NT lent their Architectural Adviser, Gervase Jackson-Stops, to act as curator. The exhibition displayed the history of patronage and 'taste' in Britain chronologically: beginning with Tudor castles, moving through the Grand Tour, and finishing with the Edwardian era, which the Gallery described as the Indian summer of country house life. A review in *History Today* regretted that 'the display is strictly limited to the hither side of the green baize door', and had missed an opportunity to discuss the wider social significance of the houses as centres of employment for a wide variety of trades.[78] The social history of the country house was a popular topic for new scholarship at the time, which included Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (1978). However, despite this focus on the grander inhabitants of the country house, the exhibition succeeded in leaving its American visitors wanting more. The *New York Times*' art

[75] 'Reflections: The Story of the Exhibition: The Treasure Houses of Britain' video, Historic Houses Archives, broadcast details unknown; Littlejohn, *The Fate of the English Country House*, p. 129.
[76] 'British Country Houses Packing Up Treasures for U.S. Show', *New York Times* (8 Aug 1985), p. 10.
[77] 'Curtain Call Looms for 'Treasure Houses'', *New York Times* (30 Oct. 1985), p. 20.
[78] 'Treasure Houses of Britain', *History Today*, 36/1 (1 Jan. 1986), p. 42.

critic John Russell wrote that it made him wish to see the objects in the settings for which they were designed, which was exactly what the show's British facilitators had intended.[79]

The timing of the exhibition was fortuitous. As David Cannadine has written, it coincided with the high point of Anglo-American relations during the Thatcher-Reagan years, when tiaras and ballgowns were in vogue among the wealthier socialites of the American capital.[80] J. Carter Brown, the Gallery's Director, had even suggested that the private owners bring along their tiaras to wear at the gala dinner. Some did, but the majority judged it vulgar, and the others left their tiaras in the hotel when they realised that wearing them was not 'the thing'.[81] *Treasure Houses* was intended to be a celebration of the art treasures still present in Britain's historic houses, rather than a reminder of their endangered status like the V&A's *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition a decade earlier. When planning that exhibition's sequel in ambition, Carter Brown was reported to recall the V&A show with a 'sickening sense of loss'.[82] The message that these houses must continue to function as 'vessels of civilisation' (Carter Brown's phrase) was clear, and many of the exhibition's visitors appear to have agreed with it.[83] A *New York Times* journalist commented that 'people would have eaten Castle Howard for breakfast with hot chocolate sauce, had it been practicable to ring room service and get it'.[84] Indeed, *Brideshead Revisited*, in which Castle Howard starred as Brideshead, was given special screenings in Washington at the time.[85] The first broadcast of the television programme that was made to accompany the exhibition was seen by 15.1 million Americans.[86] The exhibition's popularity exceeded the Gallery's expectations, prompting them to delay the show's closure for a month.

Private lenders were offered a week-long programme of events to celebrate the exhibition's opening, at an individual cost of £700. Many owners complained that they had

[79] 'The Private Palaces of Britain: An exhibition focusing on English country homes opens', *New York Times* (27 Oct. 1985), p. 68.
[80] D. Cannadine, 'The British Country House Revisited', p. 10.
[81] Lytton Cobbold, *Board Meetings in the Bath*, p. 216.
[82] 'Best of British Treasure', *Times* (16 Oct. 1985), p. 14.
[83] 'Reflections: The Story of the Exhibition'.
[84] 'The Private Palaces of Britain'.
[85] 'Brideshead in the US', *Television Today* (7 Nov. 1985), p. 26.
[86] Letter from Carter Brown to Saunders Watson, 25 Apr. 1986, Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 9.

expected more in exchange for offering up their treasures for free. Lord Bradford, who loaned a Van Dyck painting from Weston Park, told the *Sunday Times* that he could not afford to go on the trip.[87] However, US newspapers reported that a place at one of the several scheduled dinners with the titled British couples was the hottest ticket in town for Washington's rich and famous, and their visit was covered extensively in the national press. Saunders Watson, then HHA President, claimed that the major newspapers and TV news programmes carried 'anything up to three or four stories a day throughout the week', even before the royals arrived.[88] The presence of the Prince and Princess of Wales, who were patrons of the exhibition, on a four-day tour boosted press coverage further.[89] Lenders joined the royals in taking tea at the White House with Nancy Reagan, and dined alongside them at the gala dinner at the National Gallery. Some 250 people attended, including Secretary of State George Schultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, alongside the UK's Secretary of State for the Environment, Kenneth Baker, and Minister for the Arts, Richard Luce.[90] This was a diplomatic affair for both historic house lobbyists and Anglo-American relations more broadly. Beyond its royal patronage, Gervase Jackson Stops' award of an OBE in 1987 is further indication of the official recognition that the exhibition was accorded in Britain.

The upset over (what was widely believed to be) inadequate publicity of the houses from which objects were lent is indicative of the private owners' high expectations for the exhibition's effects on tourism. Despite the difficulty of safely removing and returning their most valuable objects from their houses, owners scrambled to be included. The Lytton-Cobbolds at Knebworth, who were constantly seeking publicity in America, would not have had anything included in the show had Chrissie Lytton-Cobbold not convinced Jackson-Stops to return to Knebworth and reconsider their treasures after he had visited 'in secret' and judged them unworthy of inclusion.[91] After the event, other HHA members complained that the BTA had failed to capitalise on this

[87] 'How our treasure houses went West', *Sunday Times* (8 Sep. 1985), p. 43.
[88] *Historic House*, winter 1985, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[89] 'Museum's House Party for Britons', *New York Times* (1 Nov. 1985), p. 22.
[90] *Historic House*, winter 1985, p. 5.
[91] Lytton Cobbold, *Board Meetings in the Bath*, p. 214.

opportunity to promote British tourism. The BTA had set up an office in Washington, D.C., but it was several blocks away from the gallery, and the *Sunday Times* reported that it was staffed with 'Embassy wives … at rockbottom wages'.[92] The BTA wrote to the *Times* to correct what they claimed was a total misrepresentation of their efforts, highlighting the colour supplement that they had produced for the *Washington Post*.[93] They had also distributed 500,000 copies of a 'Treasure Houses Map Folder' in the US and in British travel centres elsewhere; this was designed to aid visitors with the logistics of their trips.[94] However, the impression that the BTA's activities were inadequate persisted. The owner of Otley Hall complained that 'as a visitor to the Exhibition I had great difficulty discovering how to visit the actual Treasure Houses of Britain', and additional difficulty in locating the BTA's Travel Office.[95] However, the HHA assured their members that the two travel trade workshops that *had* been organised by the BTA—in Washington and New York—were sure to result in plenty of American visitors to their houses. The BTA calculated that the press coverage had been 'worth' over $3 million, even before the royals arrived.[96] Owners were not convinced by this quantification of their efforts, and the area of starkest omission was the absence of British traders at associated events. In the HHA's 1985 AGM, President Saunders Watson noted that it was 'a pity that there was so little evidence of British industry or trade taking advantage of the moment'—something that had also been highlighted by the *Times*.[97]

Nevertheless, the exhibition's British partners set their sights on bigger goals than a short-term revenue boost. For the HHA, it was most important that British ministers saw the exhibition's success and valued country house heritage accordingly: as a significant national asset. In order to facilitate the exhibition, they went to considerable expense. Saunders Watson noted that the HHA had paid for their own flights to Washington to aid organisation in spring

[92] 'How our treasure houses went West'.
[93] 'Draft letter to the Editor', *Sunday Times* (9 Sep. 1985), Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 8.
[94] 'BTA annual review, 1985', Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 9.
[95] Letter from John G. Mosesson (of Otley Hall) to Alan Jefferson, Director of Marketing at the BTA, 30 Jul. 1986, Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 9.
[96] *Historic House*, winter 1985, p. 5.
[97] 'HHA 1985 AGM published minutes', High Wardington House, p. 2; 'Royal tour flop – Britain's stay-away exporters', *Times* (13 Nov. 1985), p. 25.

1985, and British involvement in general had relied heavily on BTA funding. However, by the end of April he was able to assure the Duke of Buccleuch that 'the Embassy is fully seized with the importance of the exhibition and things are beginning to move'.[98] In proportion with their efforts and involvement, the HHA shared news of *Treasure Houses* and highlighted its success to members. Saunders Watson felt that the show had demonstrated to the three senior ministers who had visited the exhibition that historic houses and their contents could be a 'substantial export earner', and communicated this to members in the Association's magazine for winter 1985.[99]

The seminar that the HHA organised in Washington, covering the practical side of living in a country house, was attended by Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for the Environment. Saunders Watson commented that it was a rare opportunity to have his ear for a full twenty minutes.[100] When Baker spoke at the Association's AGM that year, he assured members that the exhibition 'brought home to me above all the central place the historic house has played in our history, our culture and our way of life throughout the ages, always a centrepiece of the local community' and convinced him of 'the vital contribution it can still make to our culture and to our economy'.[101] In a clear statement of the cultural value of the privately owned house, Baker also stated his belief that 'what gives the historic house a special life and interest is the fact that so many have owners living there and caring personally for the house'.[102] This did not mean that the government was about to make significant changes to support private ownership, however; Baker made clear that he felt owners had support enough under existing policy, via the full range of reliefs including AIL and direct grants. In particular, the 1985 Finance Act had altered the qualifying conditions for conditional exemption from CTT to include amenity land (i.e. land deemed essential for the character and amenities of an outstanding building, even if it did not 'actually touch' the building).[103] The HHA had lobbied for this change, and its inclusion in the

[98] Letter from Michael Saunders Watson to the Duke of Buccleuch, 29 Apr. 1985, High Wardington House.
[99] *Historic House*, winter 1985, p. 5.
[100] Ibid.
[101] 'HHA 1985 AGM published minutes', p. 2.
[102] Ibid., pp. 2–3.
[103] Ibid., p. 7; See: Finance Act 1985, Schedule 26, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1985/54/schedule/26 (11 May 2022).

Act was an indication of the working relationship the Association had established with ministers under Thatcher. Their role in raising the profile of Britain as a tourist destination abroad could only strengthen this relationship. The Association's central involvement in the high-profile *Treasure Houses* exhibition demonstrated how important it had become within the British heritage sector. They were still dismissed by some as the 'toffs' trade union', but their connections and expertise were taken seriously on an international level.

However, the exhibition proved an easy target for criticism for those who believed private owners selfishly exploited the international art market to the detriment of British galleries and museums. Critics claimed that the private owners who lent to the exhibition only sought to find foreign buyers for their heirlooms. Donald Wintersgill, of the *Guardian*, claimed that the exhibition was 'bad news for those who take a delight in the past, for education, for quality of life', because of the flood of export licence applications he expected to follow the show's closure.[104] Reflecting on this charge ten years later, Jonathan Marsden, then a curator at the NT, noted that only twenty-nine of the 590 displayed objects from British collections had changed hands: eleven of those had not left the houses from which they were lent, and eighteen were owned by public collections in the UK.[105] He claimed that several objects were ruled out of the exhibit because it was suspected that public exposure would increase the likelihood of their sale.[106]

A more incisive charge against the exhibition was posed by the historian Linda Colley, who judged that it had been used as 'cultural propaganda' by the HHA and 'elements within the National Trust', as a way of promoting the country house assemblage, complete with art collections. She asked why it was so important that objects remain *in situ* in houses when they might be much more accessible and better conserved in public galleries, and argued that loyalty to the past (if this was all that motivated such decisions) was 'rarely the best strategy for a nation

[104] 'Treasure island exports', *Guardian* (28 Nov. 1985), p. 26.
[105] N.B. His figures re: the number of objects displayed differ from those publicised by the National Gallery in 1985. See: J. Marsden, 'Treasure Houses of Britain', *Burlington Magazine*, 138/1117 (Apr. 1996), p. 257.
[106] Ibid.

in accelerating economic decline'.[107] The HHA did take the opportunity to call for a review of AIL arrangements. Saunders Watson wrote of the 'otherwise admirable arrangements' having become 'bogged down in Government accounting procedures' in May 1985.[108] As described above, the HHA's pressure on the government to reform AIL was merely one small facet of a many-pronged attack from the art world in the summer of 1985, until Gowrie (the Arts Minister) agreed in July that AIL would act as an open-ended contingency fund. In practice, this meant that an additional £10m reserve became available alongside departmental reserves. Arguments for this change did not hinge on the *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition, but the exhibition made the change appear more urgent. Speaking in the House of Lords during a debate on AIL provisions in April 1985, Lord Charteris, chair of both the NHMF and the committee of honour for the exhibition, answered those critics who argued that the exhibition was merely a money-making ploy:

> The exhibition is not an antique dealers' fair. Still less is it a bargain basement sale. I hope that it will give a powerful boost to tourism in this country. I suspect, however, that it will also whet some appetites on both sides of the Atlantic.[109]

This summed up the position of the organisers and defenders of *Treasure Houses*. The show *would* make collectors more eager to buy British heirlooms, but using it as a platform for sales was *not* their intention. If increased foreign interest in British artworks was a consequence of increased touristic interest in Britain, this was an unavoidable consequence of a broadly beneficial goal. Moreover, if the government was concerned to prevent sales abroad, it was their responsibility to make it easier for private owners to avoid them. Regardless of how calculated the intention to promote the 'country house assemblage', the promotion was remarkably successful.

In the years immediately following *Treasure Houses*, and after the expansion of the AIL procedure to act as an open-ended contingency fund, the government purchased a series of high-value artworks that were considered masterpieces. In their annual report of 1986–87, the

[107] 'The cult of the country house', *Times Literary Supplement* (15 Nov. 1985), p. 1293.
[108] 'Logjam on heritage', *Times* (13 May 1985), p. 13.
[109] HL Deb 24 April 1985, vol 462, c1196.

Waverley Committee commented that the expansion of the AIL scheme had enabled public purchase of several items the Committee had deemed important to retain under the Waverley criteria: Picasso's 'Weeping Woman', Constable's 'Stratford Mill', and Bellini's 'Madonna and Child', which together cost in tax foregone some £7.4 million.[110] The acceptance of the Picasso painting was made possible by an additional change to the scheme in 1987, which enabled the government to accept an item worth more than the tax liability on an estate, as long as the institution receiving the item paid the difference.[111] The £5.5m tax foregone for 'Stratford Mill' made Constable's painting the most expensive item accepted in lieu until that point, and the new AIL arrangements enabled the Arts Minister to make a quick decision on the purchase.[112]

The Waverley Committee claimed that the biggest obstacle to retaining nationally significant works of art in 1987 was the inadequacy of museum purchasing grants. However, the AIL scheme did not reach its maximum allowed expenditure in the following few years. Responding to a question on whether he planned to increase funds available to the scheme in March 1987, the Minister for Arts noted that only just over £3 million of the £10 million contingency fund had been drawn upon in that financial year.[113] In June of the following year, 1988, a total of £7,942,013 of the fund had been spent since July 1985. Partly, this was because art market prices had reached new heights by the late 1980s; governments could not be expected to intervene continually to keep artworks in the country if there were no domestic private buyers to foot the bill.

In several cases, country house owners were able to sell one or two high-value items in order to establish heritage maintenance funds (HMFs). This became a popular option after HMFs became exempt from stamp duty in 1984. Speaking in 1989, William Hanham, a spokesman for Christie's, told the *Sunday Telegraph* that 'in the 1980s, even estate owners in financial difficulty have only had to sell one or two things to tide them over'.[114] This was an exaggeration; some

[110] *Parl Pap* (1986/87), Cm 274, Export of Works of Art 1986–87, p. 1.
[111] Hansard, HC Deb 13 June 1988, vol 135, c41.
[112] Hansard, HC Deb 7 April 1987, vol 114, cc166–7.
[113] Hansard, HC Deb 9 March 1987, vol 112, c14.
[114] 'New Life for Old Money', *Sunday Telegraph* (26 Nov. 1989), pp. 41–2.

estate owners' moveable assets were tied up by a conditional exemption agreement, and others had none. Nevertheless, a significant number of estates buoyed their finances with sales of small selections of items at auction. At Highclere Castle in Hampshire, Lord Chesterfield's silver was sold by Sotheby's in 1988 to endow an HMF, raising £561,682.50. The star items, a pair of Paul de Lamerie wine coolers, were purchased by a New York buyer, but their export licence was deferred and eventually one cooler went to the V&A and another to the National Museum of Scotland, partially funded by both the NHMF and the National Art Collections Fund (NACF): another example of the expense incurred by the government (via the NHMF) when purchase decisions were delayed.[115]

Sales from Houghton Hall exemplified the tensions between a buoyant art market and the NHMF's determination to keep country house collections within the country. After the Marquess of Cholmondeley inherited the house, his family's second country seat, in 1990, he sold off a series of significant artworks from its collection to meet a substantial tax bill. The Palladian mansion in Norfolk had been commissioned by Sir Robert Walpole and still held an extensive collection of important paintings and furniture, despite the sale of the best pieces among Walpole's collection to Catherine the Great in 1779. Because of this impressive collection, the estate was valued at £116 million.[116] Cholmondeley was the sole inheritor of the estate, due to primogeniture, and therefore these sales provided his three sisters with cash alongside providing for the IHT bill and the estate's general upkeep.[117] In 1992, he gained something in the region of £10 million (including the accompanying tax douceur) from the sale by private treaty of Holbein's *Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling* to the National Gallery.[118] The Gallery 'mortgaged' its purchase grant for the following two years in order to purchase the painting, but still required donations from the NHMF, NACF and J. Paul Getty Junior (through the American Friends of the

[115] Sayer and Massingberd, *Disintegration of a Heritage*, p. 144.
[116] '£10m art-for-tax deal keeps roof over one's head', *Independent* (9 May 1998), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/pounds-10m-artfortax-deal-keeps-roof-over-one-s-head-1160130.html (26 Oct. 2021).
[117] 'Why the rush to sell?', *Daily Telegraph* (17 Feb. 1992), p. 12.
[118] 'Thieves escape with paintings worth millions from Cholmondeley home', *Times* (1 Oct. 1992), p. 2.

National Gallery).[119] Cholmondeley sold the Holbein specifically to establish an HMF from the proceeds. However, Christie's chairman, Charles Allsopp, commented at the time that the sale would clearly 'not solve all the problems' of the estate, and hinted that more items from Houghton would soon appear in the saleroom.[120] Heritage organisations looked on in horror, and Georgina Nayler of the NHMF was quoted as saying that 'Houghton mustn't be split up'.[121] However, market prices had reached such a high that private treaty sales were not nearly so attractive to owners as selling on the open market, even with the significant CGT rate of around forty per cent. In 1994, a further batch of paintings from Houghton Hall fetched £21.28 million at Christie's, and the proceeds were taxed at this rate.[122] The Marquess told the press that his choice was 'either [to] carry on [gradually selling off pictures] for the next 30 years or so, and have nothing left here by 2020, or to build a maintenance fund'.[123]

Owners like Cholmondeley were aided by the additional allure of pieces sold as part of a 'country house sale' from the 1980s onwards. This period saw the rise of contents sales held on the premises on a larger and more polished scale than ever before. Christie's and Sotheby's, London's two foremost fine art auction houses, dominated this market. These auction houses had established a model for more professionalised house sales from the late 1920s, taking advantage of the influx of business as many estate owners went bankrupt.[124] Since then, house contents sales had provided steady business for these auctioneers, but such sales were given greater prominence from the 1980s. Notable examples include the contents sales of Ellel Grange, Lancashire, by Christie's in 1979 (fetching over £250,000);[125] Keir, Perthshire, by Christie's in 1982;[126] Elveden Hall, Norfolk, by Christie's in 1984 (fetching £5,706,222);[127] and Littlecote, Berkshire, by

[119] H. Rees Leahy, 'Desiring Holbein: Presence and absence in the National Gallery', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 9/0 (2007), pp. 75–87.
[120] 'Diary: What goes next?', *Times* (2 Apr. 1992), p. 16.
[121] Ibid.
[122] "Treasures for tax' offer from the Marquess', *Dundee Courier* (10 Dec. 1994), p. 11.
[123] Ibid.
[124] E. Porter, 'Conspiracies of silence: contextualizing value at country house contents auctions in inter-war England' in T. Dooley and C. Ridgway, *Country House Collections: Their Lives and Afterlives* (Dublin, 2021), pp. 151–2.
[125] '£250,000 Victorian Sale', *Daily Telegraph* (23 Oct. 1979), p. 16.
[126] Sayer and Massingberd, *Disintegration of a Heritage*, p. 116.
[127] Christie's, *Elveden Hall: Thetford, Norfolk: The Property of the Earl of Iveagh: Prices Realised, 21 to 24 May 1984* (London, 1984).

Sotheby's in 1985.[128] The Earl of Haddington sold the contents of his second house, Tyninghame in East Lothian, in 1987 in order to set up a charitable trust for Mellerstain House, his preferred seat in the Scottish Borders.[129] The sale was expected to make £2 million, but made approximately £4 million.[130] Responding to the suggestion that Sotheby's had been overly cautious in their lot valuations, a spokesman said that 'one's never surprised at a country house sale if things do go over the top … You cannot estimate on the basis it will be a lovely day and everyone will bid a lot'.[131] Capitalising on the allure of a country house setting was a priority for the auction houses that ran these sales, and lavish catalogues emphasised estates' histories. One of the seven volumes of Christie's 1984 catalogue for Elveden Hall was dedicated to a history of the house and its owners.[132] Christie's 1994 catalogue of collections from Houghton Hall featured a frontispiece of the *Vitruvius Britannicus* engraving of Houghton and a family tree of Robert Walpole's (the original owner's) descendants.[133] Crucially, the marketing for these sales focused primarily on the history of the houses, rather than simply the quality and rarity of their contents.

The importance of a country house connection in the value chattels achieved at auction was amplified in the introduction of the 'attic sale', in which owners disposed of less favoured items in their collections. James Miller, who was responsible for country house sales as Deputy Chairman of Sotheby's, has described the sale of a collection of unwanted objects from Castle Howard in 1991 as 'the first of the so-called attic sales'.[134] The *Times* gave it the more derogatory description of a 'giant jumble sale'.[135] None of the items had been on show to the public for at least fifty years.[136] Despite the second-rate status of the items on offer, the *Financial Times* reported that there were 'more than a thousand potential bidders packed into a marquee on the lawns', and the prices achieved on site were invariably higher than those that would have been

[128] Sayer and Massingberd, *Disintegration of a Heritage*, p. 118.
[129] 'Stately raising of capital assets', *Guardian* (5 Sep. 1987), p. 24.
[130] 'Tyninghame yields £4m', *Times* (30 Sep. 1987), p. 18.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Christie's, *Elveden Hall*, v. VII.
[133] Christie's, *Works of Art from the Collections of the Cholmondeley Family and the Late Sir Philip Sassoon, Bt. from Houghton* (London, 1994).
[134] J. Miller, 'The Rise and Decline of the Country House Sale 1977–2020' in Dooley and Ridgway (eds), *Country House Collections*, p. 160–4.
[135] '£2m jumble sale', *Times* (14 Nov. 1991), p. 2.
[136] 'Furniture Goes Howard's Way', *Financial Times* (12 Nov. 1991), p. 13.

achieved in the salerooms.[137] The sale raised £2.02 million, which went towards major structural repairs of the house. Simon Howard, the owner, told the *New York Times* that repairing the roof alone would cost $1 million. He was hoping to raise money from new business ventures on estate grounds, but his plans to open a golf course and country club had already been described as 'nauseating' by the president of the local branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England before even reaching planning stages.[138] In contrast to such ostentatious on-site initiatives, the (by now) common practice of selling artworks was becoming harder to criticise as the value of artworks continued to soar.

* * *

The 1980s offered an array of financial opportunities for country house owners; many found financial success beyond their houses, and others by utilising their estates to build new businesses. The combination of lower taxes, high art market prices, improved HMFs, and a heightened cultural interest in country houses created the conditions for many country house owners to strengthen their finances substantially. Moreover, the economic and cultural importance of country houses to Britain became indisputable during this decade. The *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition not only demonstrated the value of country houses in generating tourism, but showcased Britain's cultural clout at a time when politicians were eager to transform the perception of Britain as a nation in decline.

Changes to the Waverley system reinforced the perception that maintenance of Britain's artistic heritage as a whole was dependent on the success of private ownership of country houses and their collections. The government was forced to offer greater flexibility on the Waverley system, for both sellers and buyers of artworks, in response to increased prices on the international art market. Although public museums were often unsuccessful in securing export-threatened

[137] Ibid.; Miller, 'The Rise and Decline of the Country House Sale', p. 164.
[138] 'Bric-a-brac Revisited: Not a Tag Sale', *New York Times* (7 Nov. 1991), https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/07/garden/bric-a-brac-revisited-not-a-tag-sale.html (5 Jun. 2021).

artworks, the NHMF and the expansion of AIL ensured that many significant art objects were acquired by the state. This, and the continuation of the conditional exemption of significant historic buildings under IHT, reflected a wider trend towards public acquisition that resisted party politics.

Chapter Six

Still Unimpressed by the Cause of the *Anciens Pauvres*: Lobbying the Major Government, 1990–97

John Major succeeded Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in November 1990. For the HHA, a new ministry meant fresh opportunity to convince the government of the importance of their requests. However, although the HHA's (and the majority of their house members') preferred ruling party continued to be the Conservatives, this election result was not necessarily a promising outcome for the future of privately owned country houses. Major's statements on his government's attitudes towards wealth and equality were somewhat contradictory. In his first speech as leader to the Conservative Party Conference (1991), Major famously declared that he wanted to 'see wealth cascading down the generations'.[1] This was music to the ears of the HHA, who campaigned for policies that would assist the accumulation of generational wealth. Simultaneously, however, Major was known for his stated commitment to a 'classless society', involving a 'tapestry of talents' (based not on equality but on 'respect for achievement', echoing Thatcher's rejection of the concept of class).[2] It seemed unlikely that Major would favour the HHA's requests for targeted policies enabling aristocratic landowners to pass on wealth to the next generation.

During Major's ministry, the HHA lobbied primarily for three policy changes: the removal of Income Tax and CGT on maintenance funds for heritage property; the abolition or lowering of VAT on repairs to historic buildings; and more (and more widely available) grants, including the extension of Heritage Lottery funding to privately owned heritage. The differing outcomes of these campaigns indicate the power dynamics within Westminster and Whitehall with regard to decision-making on heritage issues, particularly in relation to taxation policy. They also illustrate the heritage sector's changing relationship with government, as funding became

[1] 'Leader's speech, 1991', http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=137 (30 Apr. 2022).
[2] Ibid.

more and more targeted towards historic sites that offered educational programmes and attempted to reach new audiences.

Weathering market forces

According to the HHA, the Thatcher years had not been as beneficial for historic house owners as the government, and the casual observer, was inclined to believe. In the autumn 1990 edition of *Historic House* magazine, they published an open letter to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Chris Patten, noting that 250 listed buildings with supporting agricultural land had been put on the market during the 1980s. It stated that 'if the current trends continue, 1990 will be above the average over the past ten years'. The main cause of these sales, the HHA believed, was the continuing lack of funds available for repair and maintenance. English Heritage grants to the private sector had fallen from £3.1 million in 1988/89 to £1.9 million in 1989/90, and English Heritage had recently informed several HHA member houses that it would not continue to offer its forty per cent contribution to rolling repair programmes, making these programmes unsustainable without sales of artworks.[3] Alongside fewer grants, the Association pointed to declining agricultural income as a significant contributing cause of economic instability. Agricultural income statistics do not support this assessment, but rather demonstrate a steady increase in income from the early 1990s.[4] Nevertheless, in 1991 the Earl of Shelburne (HHA President) claimed that 'up to the early 1980s, agricultural land generated sufficient income to support the maintenance and repairs of many historic houses. Today, with all but a few exceptions, farming returns are at best neutral, or in deficit.'[5] Noting the possibility of tax rises to fund the Gulf War in the spring, Shelburne commented that 'this doom and gloom might not be so bad if,

[3] *Historic House*, autumn 1990, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[4] Y. Zayed and P. Loft, 'Agriculture: historical statistics', House of Commons briefing paper, 25 Jun. 2019, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03339/SN03339.pdf (30 Apr. 2022), p. 13
[5] *Historic House*, summer 1991, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.

during the 1980s, historic house owners had benefited from those buoyant years and managed to repair and endow their properties. Few had the chance.'[6] The message to the government was clear: they could not rest easy in their belief that general tax cuts were sufficient to protect private heritage; targeted exemptions and arrangements were required.

The HHA leadership had difficulty gaining the sympathy of government ministers in the early 1990s. The Association continually referred to a comment made by Nicholas Ridley, a Secretary of State for the Environment during Thatcher's second and third ministries, to illustrate the prevailing attitude of the Conservative Party. Ridley's father was the 3rd Viscount Ridley, and his grandfather was Edwin Lutyens, the lauded architect known for his modernized country houses. Despite this, Ridley's attitude towards continual family ownership of country houses was consistent with that of Michael Heseltine's (Thatcher's first Environment Secretary's) views in 1980. During his address to the HHA's 1988 AGM, Ridley assured his audience that he believed 'passionately that historic houses are safer and better run in private hands'. Yet, he warned them that he was 'not impressed by the cause of the *anciens pauvres*'. After all, he explained, many 'families who pride themselves on having always lived in a house in fact married into it, bought it or stole it at some point in their murky history, when they were robber barons, property speculators or simply won the pools. There have to be some opportunities for today's *nouveaux riches*…'.[7] This comment came to exemplify what the HHA later referred to as the 'market forces' argument, or 'the Ridley line': the belief that house owners 'must face market forces like everyone else'.[8] When the HHA met with Bill Robinson (special adviser to the Chancellor, Norman Lamont) in January 1992, Terry Empson (Director General of the HHA) told him that they felt the government's policy was 'muddled'. On the one hand, there was the 'Ridley line', and on the other was the practice of 'dishing out large dollops of cash' to endow houses for the NT via the NHMF.

[6] *Historic House*, spring 1991, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[7] *Historic House*, winter 1988, Historic Houses Archives, p. 25.
[8] See: 'Record of a meeting with Dr W. Robinson [Bill Robinson], special adviser to the Chancellor of the Exchequer [Norman Lamont]', 9 Jan. 1992, Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 12-A.

The HHA's notes of their meeting with Robinson recorded that he was 'in principle hostile, "in the nicest possible way"' to their cause, but acknowledged that their request for the government to 'leave the resources with the people who were coping with the problems in the ground' was 'a respectable conservative argument'.[9] This superficial discussion reveals how far away the HHA were from securing crucial support from the Chancellor to push through tax reforms; bolstering privately owned historic heritage was not on the government's agenda. The HHA received a more sympathetic hearing in a meeting with Chris Smith MP, the opposition spokesman on financial affairs, in the same month. Smith 'saw the force' of the HHA's argument that tax concessions were in the public interest, and in principle was not averse to seeing additional concessions enacted, but acknowledged that 'many in his party would have a knee-jerk reaction against it'.[10]

In early 1992 it appeared that the Association would require a great deal of assistance and luck in order to convince either the Conservatives or Labour, led by Neil Kinnock, to commit to the changes they sought. Their difficulties were compounded by the looming election in April, which both parties believed they could win. This was the first election in which the party lead had switched in the opinion polls during the campaign.[11] William Proby (HHA Taxation Committee Chairman) noted that it was difficult to make financial decisions because 'the tax regime is likely to be less onerous if a Conservative Government is returned, but more onerous under a Labour Government'.[12] The tax plans that Labour laid out in their manifesto would leave high earners substantially worse off; the top rate of tax would increase from forty to fifty per cent, and high earners' exemption from National Insurance contributions would be removed. Much of Major's focus in the run up to the election was on arguing that these plans would leave everyone (including lower earners) worse off, and that further tax rises would be inevitable to compensate for a significant rise in public spending.[13] Norman Lamont, then Chancellor, believed that his party's

[9] Ibid.
[10] 'Summary note of a meeting with Mr Chris Smith, MP', 22 Jan. 1992, Rockingham Castle, HHA Box 12-A.
[11] 'Poll comfort as parties see there is all to play for', *Daily Telegraph* (19 Mar. 1992), p. 11.
[12] *Historic House*, spring 1992, Historic Houses Archives, p. 13.
[13] See: 'Mr Major's Labour Tax Bombshell Statement – 7 January 1992',

campaign against Labour's proposed budget ultimately secured the public vote for the incumbent Conservative government.[14]

Following election victory, the government created a new department to amalgamate the functions relating to heritage, arts, sport, tourism, and media that were previously scattered throughout other departments (such as the Department of the Environment and the Office of Arts and Libraries). This was named the Department of National Heritage (DNH) and headed by David Mellor, a staunch supporter of Major who was thought to be destined for higher office after years of lateral career moves under Thatcher.[15] The DNH is considered to have been shaped considerably by Mellor, who personally convinced Major of the desirability of a 'ministry of culture', a concept of which both the Conservative Party and Whitehall were suspicious.[16] The title 'Department of National Heritage' was an odd choice considering the breadth of the department's new responsibilities, but the term 'heritage' had wide applications by this time; there is no indication that it was a statement of the DNH's priorities beyond—on a superficial level—the word's harmony with the concept of conservatism. In the Conservatives' election manifesto, it was stated that the DNH would aim to 'encourage private sector enterprise', emphasising an intention to work 'in partnership' with the NT, heritage quangos, and private owners.[17] Despite its wide array of responsibilities, the DNH was relatively small; it kept a staff of only 250. This was because the DNH existed primarily to give a clear policy steer to the public bodies that fell under its purview, facilitating their partnerships with private and independent bodies.[18] For example, English Heritage and the NHMF operated independently of the DNH, but required its consent in much of their decision-making.

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https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1992/01/07/mr-majors-labour-tax-bombshell-statement-7-january-1992/ (25 Nov. 2021).

[14] A. Seldon, *Major: A Political Life* (London, 1998), p. 280.

[15] N. Ravenscroft, 'Paradise postponed? The Department of National Heritage and political hegemony', *Critical Social Policy*, 14/41 (1994), p. 6.

[16] A. Taylor, "Arm's length but hands on': Mapping the new governance: the Department of National Heritage and cultural politics in Britain', *Public Administration*, 75/3 (1997), p. 443.

[17] '1992 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto', http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/1992/1992-conservative-manifesto.shtml (7 Jan. 2022).

[18] Taylor, 'Arm's length but hands on', p. 446.

The government's response to the potential sale of Pitchford Hall, an Elizabethan half-timbered country house in Shropshire, revealed how far the new DNH was willing to intervene when a country house ensemble was threatened. Pitchford Hall's owners, the Colthursts, suffered heavy losses from their Lloyd's of London holdings, when the market was on the brink of collapse due to an influx of asbestos and pollution-related claims. Finding themselves unable to maintain the house, the Colthursts offered it to the government. The NT had attempted to take on the house, but were unable to raise the £7 million endowment they believed necessary for its maintenance.[19] The NT's Director, Angus Stirling, stated that the 'totality of the collection' was very rare in a house of Pitchford Hall's 'stature and age'.[20] The question of whether the government would intervene to prevent the separation of house, contents and estate was raised in the summer of 1992, soon after the general election in April. David Mellor refused to authorise a financial package offered by English Heritage and the NHMF on the grounds that it would absorb too great a proportion of English Heritage's funds.[21] The package, whereby English Heritage would purchase the house, find a tenant, and offer public access, and the NHMF would purchase the contents, did not require additional government funds. However, every purchase decision by English Heritage required the consent of the Secretary of State. Mellor was reported to have said that the hall was too far from a motorway to become a 'major attraction' for English Heritage, who would have taken on custodianship of the property under the deal.[22] The house's contents were sold by Christie's on 28–30 September, and the sale of the house itself went ahead in October.

The sales caused considerable protest from across the heritage bodies, and criticism of Mellor in particular. Mellor took his decision six weeks after the package was put forward, and

[19] 'Mellor rejects plan by English Heritage to save Elizabethan hall and its contents', *Times* (3 Sep. 1992), p. 12.
[20] Hansard, HC Deb 20 October 1992, vol 212, c409.
[21] 'Bottom Line for the Country Seat', *Sunday Telegraph* (20 Jun. 1993), p. 12–13.
[22] This was denied by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, Robert Key. However, it is indicative of the heritage lobby's belief that the decision to reject the funding package was unjustified. See: HC Deb 20 October 1992, vol 212, c412; 'Mellor's missed a crusade', *Daily Mail* (9 Sep. 1992), p. 33.

less than a month before the contents sale.[23] In a subsequent Commons debate, called by Tam Dalyell in an attempt to draw lessons from the government's handling of the situation, Robert Key (the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage) noted that the heritage department (then the DOE) had been aware of Pitchford's precarious position since the previous February.[24] Key claimed the DNH had been anxious to avoid jeopardising the government's and English Heritage's ability to aid the 'large number of houses that rely upon shared resources, which are pretty meagre at the best of times', stating that there were 'about 700 houses of Pitchford hall's quality in this country and about 1,400 members of the Historic Houses Association'.[25] This anxiety was fuelled by the DNH's belief that the financial package proposed by English Heritage and the NHMF would not suffice to maintain the Hall in the long term; the government had suggested that something in the region of £13 million would be necessary, a figure that heritage lobbyists disputed. He argued that the house's grade I listing ensured that it was not 'lost'.

However, Key did note that the situation had made 'absolutely clear' that the HHA regarded improved maintenance funds as a feasible solution for owners who might find themselves in a similar situation to the Colthursts, and assured the House that the DNH was 'addressing that issue'. Notably, the HHA were not particularly vocal about the sale, although Pitchford Hall was a member house at the time. In his annual submission to the Chancellor in December, Shelburne (HHA President) observed that even the provision of a tax-free maintenance fund was unlikely to have saved the house. However, the advantage of such a fund was that 'the assets in an [HMF] would have been beyond the reach of Lloyds creditors, and in less critical circumstances would prevent the separation of a house and its contents'.[26] It would not aid the HHA's cause to castigate the government for an unwillingness to aid country house owners who did not open to the public and had been unlucky in their investments. The timing of Pitchford's owners' financial struggles was particularly unfortunate because Burton Constable

[23] 'Mellor rejects plan by English Heritage to save Elizabethan hall and its contents'.
[24] HC Deb 20 October 1992, vol 212 c412.
[25] Ibid.
[26] 'Annual submission to the Chancellor, Dec. 1992', Rockingham Castle, Box 12-A.

Hall and Brympton d'Evercy were also in dire financial straits in 1992; the NHMF contributed over £5 million to a charitable trust for Burton Constable in that year.[27] The belief that Pitchford would absorb too great a proportion of overall resources does appear to have been the government's overriding concern, as they claimed. However, given that English Heritage had been created to remove the civil service's caretaking responsibilities related to heritage to an external, semi-public body, it is interesting that the minister contradicted the organisation's own assessment of their finances. This is perhaps more indicative of fear (within the DNH) that more country house purchasing crises would occur, and that the government would be expected to step in with emergency funding, than political calculation.

The Disintegration of a Heritage

Between 1990 and 1993, the HHA led a study into the sales of historic houses during the 1980s. The study was intended to establish why 250 listed buildings with supporting agricultural land (the HHA's definition of an historic estate) were sold in the previous decade, who had purchased them, and for what purpose.[28] This was published in 1993 under the title *The Disintegration of a Heritage: Country Houses and their Collections 1979–1992* (hereafter: *Disintegration*), and was written by Michael Sayer, an independent historian and member of the tax committees of both the HHA and CLA, and edited by journalist Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd. A series of prominent sales took place whilst the study was under preparation, including that of Pitchford Hall. The HHA used the news of these sales to raise publicity for the statistics they were gaining on sales of the previous decade, contributing to an overall sense of a gathering crisis. Specifically, the sales provided a platform for the HHA to advance its argument for a tax-free HMF, which had been one of their principal focuses in recent years. The income of HMFs was taxed at thirty-five

[27] 'Burton Constable Hall, North Humberside', https://www.nhmf.org.uk/projects/burton-constable-hall-north-humberside (4 Mar. 2022); M. J. Sayer and H. Montgomery-Massingberd, *The Disintegration of a Heritage: Country Houses and their Collections 1979–1992* (Norwich, 1993), p. 41.
[28] *Historic House*, autumn 1990, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.

per cent, alongside a thirty-five per cent tax on their capital gains. Moreover, HMFs could not be used for improvements to a property such as renovation of a building to accommodate the visiting public. Brympton d'Evercy, sold in August 1992 by a family who had owned it for nearly three hundred years, was cited in Shelburne's December 1992 submission to the Chancellor as a house that could have been saved if it had been endowed with a tax-free HMF.[29] The sixteenth-century manor house in Somerset had been featured in the Gowers Report in 1950 as a house that ought to remain in private ownership, and was widely celebrated. Christopher Hussey had said that he knew of no other house that 'summarises so exquisitely English country life'.[30] Its owners, the Clive-Ponsonby-Fanes, had carried out extensive renovations, opened to the public and had only recently, in 1990, won the HHA's Garden of the Year Award. However, the income from visitors was simply not enough to keep the house going.[31] In the introduction to *Disintegration*, Hugh Massingberd wrote that 'nobody could have done more' than the family did to attempt to maintain the house.[32] In the case of Burton Constable, for which a charitable foundation was created with NHMF funds, Shelburne claimed that it might have been maintained in private ownership for considerably less money (in the form of tax foregone) if the family had been afforded the opportunity of endowing a tax-free HMF in the 1980s.[33] It was a poor choice for a flagship example of loss, however. The house was not a 'complete entity' and the family had only periodically resided in it; its contents were sold in 1956, after which it housed a boys' school until 1974. It was bought by another family and is now used as a wedding venue.

In the summary of *Disintegration*'s conclusions, Sayer observed that the recommendations of the report were 'essentially no different from those of Sir Ernest Gowers in 1950 and Viscount Waverley in 1952'. One of those recommendations had been tax relief for

[29] 'Annual submission to the Chancellor, Dec. 1992'; 'Family is forced to sell country house after nearly 300 years of ownership', *Times* (29 Aug. 1992), p. 14.
N.B. The contents of the house had been sold in the 1950s, when the house was let as a school (until 1974).
[30] Quoted in 'Glorious resurrection', *Daily Telegraph* (24 Mar. 1990), p. x.
[31] 'Family is forced to sell country house after nearly 300 years of ownership', *Times* (29 Aug. 1992), p. 14.
[32] Sayer and Massingberd, *The Disintegration of a Heritage*, p. 1.
[33] 'Annual submission to the Chancellor, Dec. 1992'.

repair costs, a frequent request of the HHA that was repeatedly rejected. Under Major the VAT applied to historic house repairs was particularly onerous and calls for its reduction were particularly unlikely to succeed. The rate of VAT was increased from 15% to 17.5% in 1991, partly to compensate for a reduction in the widely unpopular Community Charge (or poll tax), and VAT on domestic fuel was introduced for the first time in 1994.[34] This latter change was highly unpopular, and prompted criticism that it would hit the poorest in society hardest; the government was compelled to announce a compensation package for pensioners in the 1994 budget.[35] Not only did these increases indicate the difficulty of gaining concessions on VAT, but they compounded the problems of maintenance for country house owners, whose fuel bills were already exceptionally high.

When the study was published in July 1993, it received scant press coverage from the major newspapers, with the exception of articles in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Telegraph* by Hugh Massingberd himself, who worked full-time for the papers as the obituary editor.[36] In *Country Life*, Giles Worsley's summary of the report's purpose was incisive, and one of the few assessments of the study that questioned the assumptions that had been made in the process of compiling the report.

> It is intended to set off a similar wave of outrage to that which followed the publication of the *Destruction of the Country House* and sweep in the changes [the HHA] feels are needed to save those country houses still in private hands: reform of Maintenance Funds, VAT relief on repairs to historic buildings and an improvement in the level of grant aid.[37]

Worsley noted that the study's figure of 259 houses sold since 1979 was misleading: many of those houses were on 'second estates' (i.e. not a family's primary home), others had been in institutional use for decades, and more than a fifth of the houses cited had been bought by the occupying families during the twentieth century. Worsley also noted that divorce—unmentioned in the report—helped to explain a significant number of sales, alongside splitting an estate

[34] S. J. Lee, *Aspects of British Political History 1914–1995* (London, 2005), p. 241.
[35] Seldon, *Major*, p. 409.
[36] For example, see: 'Bottom Line for the Country Seat'.
[37] 'A False Dusk?', *Country Life*, 187/26 (1 Jul. 1993), p. 88.

between heirs, bad legal advice, and heirs who were unwilling to take on the burden of an historic house. His overall conclusion was that a changing society, in which the young were unwilling to trade comfortable lifestyles for the problems of running a country estate (whether inherited or bought), was an unacknowledged but decisive contributor to country house sales. The HHA was correct to pursue the reforms they had outlined, he wrote, but they had weakened their case with 'too many questionable cases' in this report.[38]

The *Chartered Surveyors Weekly* contrasted the 'crisis' depicted by Massingberd and Sayer with a 'flurry of recent deals' indicating that 'demand for country houses as family homes is very strong'.[39] Tony Morris-Eyton, of Knight Frank & Rutley, explained that these estates were now attractive options for potential home owners, as '[n]ot only has agriculture picked up and farm incomes improved, but there are also fairly major tax benefits in buying an estate. You can roll money into farmland free of capital gains tax and pass it on free of inheritance tax'.[40] Although not every surviving estate retained extensive agricultural land, this perception of the lucrative country estate was detrimental to the HHA's campaigns. In response, the HHA emphasised the loss of the 'integral entity' of an historic estate. In the summer of 1992, *Country Life* described the country house market as at a 'low ebb'.[41] Despite a decline in house sales, the HHA was alarmed by a dramatic rise in contents sales, from an average of £13.9 million per annum in 1986–91 to £43 million in 1992.[42] In his December 1992 submission to the Chancellor, Shelburne wrote that conditional exemption was clearly failing as a defence against the disintegration of historic houses, because 'no more than a quarter of all historic properties purchased by new owners are secured as an integral entity'.[43] As Shelburne highlighted, statistics on property sales alone were an inadequate measure of the likelihood that historic houses would continue in private ownership

[38] Ibid., p. 91.
[39] 'Report claims country homes crisis', *Chartered Surveyors Weekly* (15 Jul. 1993), p. 16.
[40] 'Property: The manor is reborn', *Independent* (13 Nov. 1993), https://www.independent.co.uk/property/house-and-home/property-the-manor-is-reborn-wealthy-buyers-are-rediscovering-the-advantages-financial-and-social-of-owning-an-estate-says-anne-spackman-1504063.html (2 May 2022).
[41] 'Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain', *Country Life* (30 Jul. 1992), p. 45.
[42] 'Annual submission to the Chancellor, Dec. 1992'.
[43] Ibid.

for decades to come: there was no guarantee that new owners would prioritise maintaining an historic house above capitalising on the land on which it stood.

On 2 July 1993, coinciding with the publication of *Disintegration*, the Prince of Wales hosted a meeting between 'heritage interests'; the Secretary of State for National Heritage, Peter Brooke; and John Major. Simon Jenkins and Marcus Binney presented on the merits of private ownership, and a potential new system of 'crisis management' for when an important historic building was put on sale was discussed.[44] Shelburne attended alongside the Chairmen of English Heritage, the NHMF, and the NT. The *Times* reported that the Prime Minister had emerged from the meeting as 'a champion of the movement to preserve Britain's historic houses'.[45] The following month, the Prince reportedly presented the results of a public opinion poll to Major. The Prime Minister was informed that half the population felt that the government and local authorities ought to provide 'far more money' to aid the preservation of historical buildings and sites.[46] However, no new concessions followed. This may have been partly due to the negative press that private historic house owners had received as a group the previous year, when owners' failure to comply with conditional exemption arrangements was heavily publicised.

Conditional Exemption under threat

While the HHA pressed for more favourable financial mechanisms for historic house owners, the equity of existing conditional exemption arrangements was under scrutiny. In July 1992, a proposed clause to the upcoming Finance Bill drew attention to the existing conditional exemption system. Labour MPs, with the aid of the *Observer* newspaper, highlighted the difficulty of obtaining access to conditionally exempt land and works of art, which were required to be publicly accessible. Chris Smith MP, Labour's Treasury spokesman, tabled an amendment

[44] 'Major backs prince's heritage crusade' and 'Major backs heritage fight', *Times* (3 Jul. 1993), p. 1; p. 8.
[45] Ibid., p. 8.
[46] 'Spend on heritage, Prince tells Major', *Daily Telegraph* (9 Aug. 1993), p. 4.

to the 1984 Inheritance Tax Act requiring that exempted chattels be publicly accessible for a minimum of fifty-two days a year, and 'full details of the public access' to both chattels and land be made 'readily available'.[47] Under the existing system, the level of public access required was decided on a case-by-case basis.[48] Smith had attempted to locate and view artworks on the register of exempted chattels in the National Art Library, London, but found that the register was difficult to view.[49] Not only that, but once accessed the register did not contain an index; an individual would need to know exactly what they were looking for in order to find the owner's (or their intermediary's) contact details. Even then, many of the details listed were out of date, and when they were accurate the listed contact did not necessarily know how access might be obtained, as there had been so few (or no) requests for such access. Smith said, 'We are talking about public money forgone—£100 million over a 10-year period—yet, even from the Treasury, which has granted the relief from inheritance tax, or from any other Government Department, information about where the public access is available is simply not available'.[50] He gave the example of Lady Clarissa Collin, whose Bransdale Moor estate in the North York Moors had been exempted from transfer tax in 1978. She had erected signs on her estate telling the general public to keep to the footpath, and employed gamekeepers to enforce that restriction, despite her legal obligation to provide access for walking or horse riding in addition to (pre-existing) rights of way.[51] Smith was making use of examples that the *Observer* had publicised in a series of 'exposé' articles the month before, informing readers of private historic house owners' 'secret tax deals' due to be exposed by parliamentary watchdogs in a 'public access scandal'.[52] This publicity contributed to heavy criticism of the conditional exemption system itself from the opposition benches, in addition to criticism of the government's failure to monitor how well it functioned.

[47] Hansard, HC Deb 7 July 1992, vol 211, c200.
[48] *Parl Pap.* (1992), HC 336, Inheritance Tax (National Audit Office Report), p. 13.
[49] Copies of the register were available in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Belfast. However, it was not well known which institutions housed them, and how they might be accessed; this was a point of discussion in the 7 July debate.
[50] HC Deb 7 July 1992, vol 211, c201.
[51] Ibid., cc203–4.
[52] 'Landlords' promises earn secret tax deals', *Observer* (7 Jun. 1992), p. 1; 'Probe starts in £150m land access scandal', *Observer* (14 Jun. 1992), p. 6.

The debate was used by some as a platform to attack what many Labour MPs saw as the Conservative Party's record of protecting the rich at the expense of the country's poorest. Labour MP Alan Milburn quoted the Financial Secretary's comment that the principal beneficiaries of income tax reductions from 1979 had been those earning more than £80,000 a year.[53] Others spoke of lost potential of tax foregone on conditionally exempt property, highlighting railway infrastructure or hospital projects that would require the same amount of money. Andrew Bennett, another Labour MP, called the scheme 'a way of maintaining wealth and power in Britain', and accused the government of deliberately withholding information from the public to protect the interests of 'some well-known parliamentary names'. He questioned the role the system played in the 'open government and classless society of the Prime Minister'.[54] His Labour colleague Geoffrey Hoon went further, and called the system 'a Kafkaesque exercise in secrecy and obfuscation'.[55] Hoon contrasted the experience of small businesses, which regularly faced tax inspectors' questioning, with the government's failure to dedicate inspectors to ensuring that public access conditions for exempted land and artworks were met. Peter Mandelson, another Labour MP, added that there would be no grounds for the government to reject the amendment, because it would cost them nothing and only serve to aid the implementation of existing agreements.[56] Ultimately, the amendment was impractical: the majority of those who had secured conditional exemption of their assets on the basis of by-appointment viewing could not afford to open for twenty-five days a year, and if they were forced to sell then the pressure on the government to 'save' objects and houses would be greater than budgets allowed. Nevertheless, the negative publicity prompted by the proposal forced the government to review and ensure better implantation of the existing arrangements.

With the entire system of conditional exemption under attack, the government was not inclined to award further tax concessions. The Committee of Public Accounts' October 1993 report on Inheritance Tax (IHT), which resulted from the much-publicised failure of owners to

[53] HC Deb 7 July 1992, vol 211, c214.
[54] Ibid., c210.
[55] Ibid., c211.
[56] Ibid., c214.

meet their access obligations, noted that not enough had been done 'to ensure that the public has been able to benefit fully from the very large sums of tax foregone'.[57] They noted that the list of exempt chattels which could be viewed by appointment, known as the V&A list, had been digitised as a result of the complaints of the previous year.[58] However, they felt that the Inland Revenue ought to do more to publicise the list to museums and galleries, many of which they claimed were unaware that the list existed and that the items were available for loan.[59] The Committee also recorded their concern that the amount of tax foregone was not taken into account when the panel of expert advisers decided whether an object was significant enough to be accepted in lieu of tax, to maintain confidentiality. This meant that the question of whether exempting an object represented 'value for money' was not taken into consideration.[60] The issue was shelved, but not resolved. The extent of Labour MPs' criticism of the conditional exemption scheme did not bode well for its future.

Heritage Lottery funding

One of the most significant changes affecting British heritage in this period was the introduction of Heritage Lottery funding. A small percentage of the proceeds from the National Lottery, which was introduced in 1994, were administered and distributed by the NHMF as part of the Lottery's funds for 'Good Causes'. Applications for these new grants opened on 4 January 1995.[61] The grants represented an enormous increase in public funding available to heritage projects. In its first full year of operation (to 31 March 1996) the Trustees of the NHMF awarded 343 grants to a value of £194 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).[62] In comparison, the NHMF's

[57] *Parl Pap.* (1992/93), HC 688, Committee of Public Accounts, Sixtieth Report: Inland Revenue: Inheritance Tax, xi.
[58] Ibid., p. x.
[59] Ibid., p. vi.
[60] Ibid.
[61] *Parl Pap.* (1994/95), HC 766, National Heritage Memorial Fund Lottery Distribution Account 1994–95, p. 2.
[62] *Parl Pap.* (1995/96), HC 617, National Heritage Memorial Fund: Heritage Lottery Fund: Lottery

total spend between 1980 and 1995 had been only £176.6 million.[63] The NHMF was quick to assert its own importance despite the substantial funding now available from the HLF. The NHMF's powers were wider, and it was 'not constrained by the Government's changing priorities and directions about the spending of National Lottery funds'.[64] The NHMF's wider powers included granting funds to privately owned historic houses, whereas the only historic buildings eligible for HLF funding were those owned by a public or charitable body. This provoked protest from the HHA, and in winter 1994, William Proby (their new President), complained that the HLF 'had the opportunity to revise' the exclusion of private recipients for lottery money, but had 'declined to do so'.[65] However, from its announcement the lottery had faced criticism as an elitist enterprise: a scheme to gather money from the poor to spend on the amusements of the wealthy.[66] Including private owners within the lottery's funding remit would only have heightened this criticism. In a debate in February 1995, Viscount Astor, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the DNH, confirmed that the government expected English Heritage and the NHMF to support private owners; there were no plans to include them under the HLF.[67]

The issue of which categories of heritage were eligible for lottery funding exacerbated pre-existing concerns about the adequacy of public funding measures for privately owned heritage. The heads of English Heritage and the NHMF consistently called for more funding to be made available for privately owned historic houses, but they were limited in the scope of their own funds. The HHA worried that lottery funding for heritage would enable the government to reduce other forms of funding. Indeed, the NHMF had its grant cut from £12 million annually (1990–1993) to £8.2 million in 1994, with £400,000 of that earmarked for the administrative changes necessitated by the introduction of the National Lottery.[68] Georgina Nayler, the NHMF's Director, expressed her anxiety over 'keeping the government to its commitment to keep lottery

Distribution Account 1995-96, p. 2.
[63] V. Tandy, 'The Heritage Lottery Fund and its role in the construction and preservation of the past: 1994–2016' (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2018), p. 11.
[64] *Parl Pap.* (1994/95), HC 766, p. 3.
[65] *Historic House*, winter 1994, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[66] 'Redistribution to the rich', *Economist* (5 Nov. 1994), p. 25.
[67] Hansard, HC Deb 21 February 1995, vol 561, cc1029–30.
[68] 'Funds for a Fairy Godmother', *Country Life* (13 May 1993), p. 90.

money additional to existing public expenditure—old NHMF money'.[69] She also said that 'if a very large country house comes up [for sale] we are up the creek without a paddle with only £7.8 million'.[70] These concerns were compounded by English Heritage's existing money shortages and stringent means tests for grants, which many owners did not meet. When English Heritage rehauled their means tests to resolve this problem, with a new system that recognised the vulnerability of ongoing estates, William Proby (HHA President) wrote that this was 'the only good news for privately owned historic houses in recent years'.[71] Proby later commented that the HHA's relations with English Heritage had 'not always been good'.[72] However, English Heritage were clearly aware of the limitations in their ability to shore up private historic estates, and added their voice to campaigns for the extension of HLF funding. Jocelyn Stevens, English Heritage's Chairman, told the HHA's 1995 AGM that the exclusion of private owners from National Lottery funding was 'inexcusable'.[73] He repeated this message to the National Heritage Select Committee in March 1996, telling them that the exclusion of privately owned heritage was 'preposterous and horrifying'.[74] Combined with the recent changes to English Heritage's grant assessment system, Stevens' consistent support suggested to Proby that the organisation appeared 'once again to be prepared to champion the cause of the private owner in the maintenance of the National Heritage'.[75]

The National Heritage Select Committee was convinced of the merits of extending HLF funding to privately owned properties, and their May 1996 report recommended this extension 'on condition that the grants are for the public good and subject to similar conditions to those applying to grants under section 3A of the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953'.[76] The DNH accepted the recommendation, but it was slow to implement it. Lottery funding

[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 91.
[71] *Historic House*, winter 1995, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[72] *Historic House*, summer 1996, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[73] 'Handouts urged for historic houses', *Times* (22 Nov. 1995), p. 7.
[74] 'Private stately homes 'deserve lottery money for repairs'', *Times* (29 Mar. 1996), p. 6.
[75] *Historic House*, summer 1996, p. 5.
[76] *Parl Pap.* (1995/96), HC 586, 'National Heritage Committee: The national lottery: government response to the second report from the National Heritage Committee', p. x.

was eventually made available to privately owned historic houses in the National Heritage Bill of February 1997, which came into force in March 1998.[77] However, the details of which houses and what projects would be eligible for funding were unclear. The HHA informed their members that they suspected direct lottery funding would be available to houses that could 'demonstrate major public benefit' only.[78] This would have the indirect benefit of freeing up a portion of English Heritage's budget, that would previously have gone towards funding the largest commercially open country houses, to fund section 3A grants. These were the routine maintenance and repair grants that smaller houses in particular would continue to rely upon. In September 1997, during a period when the functions of the HLF were under review, the HHA published a report entitled '"A Stitch in Time…": The Case for Capital Support from the Heritage Lottery Fund for Historic Houses, Gardens and Parks in Private Ownership'. It argued that the existing HLF funding system imposed arbitrary distinctions between houses in public and private ownership, and HLF grants needed to be made widely available to the latter under the new arrangements.[79] This marked the beginning of a longer struggle to ensure that the HLF trustees would give consideration to applications from private owners that was commensurate to their consideration of applications from charitable or public bodies under New Labour.

* * *

After a few years of Major's ministry, many historic house owners no longer instinctively viewed the Conservative Party as their natural ally. Upon retiring from his HHA presidency in November 1994, the Earl of Shelburne commented that he felt historic house owners could expect greater support from a Labour government than the current, Conservative, government. He claimed that 'the more traditional Labour party' respected tradition, and respected heritage as an industry. By

[77] *Parl Pap.* (1998/99), HC 195, 'The Heritage Lottery Fund: Volume I: Report and Proceedings of the Committee', p. vii.
[78] *Historic House*, spring 1997, Historic Houses Archives, p. 11.
[79] HHA, '"A Stitch in Time…": The Case for Capital Support from the Heritage Lottery Fund for Historic Houses, Gardens and Parks in Private Ownership' (London, 1997), Historic Houses Archives.

contrast, the 'contemporary Conservative politician has a certain disdain for the aristocracy, whatever that may be'.[80] If this disdain existed, it likely originated from a desire to attune with the electorate; in October 1993, the *Spectator* claimed that 'a disturbing virus of reverse discrimination' now affected anyone with a privileged background. They claimed that 'droves of English nobs are effusively embracing the New World [i.e. moving to California] because they feel they are being held back in Britain by their irrevocably upper- or upper-middle-class backgrounds'. Henry Dent-Brocklehurst, heir to Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire, was quoted as saying that he had moved to LA because he was discriminated against in England.[81] In April 1995, the *Independent* reported that aristocrats were 'looking to Tony Blair as their political saviour'. HHA President William Proby emphasised that Labour, although yet to set their agenda ahead of the next election, were 'very sympathetic' to the HHA's requests for help. He was likely referring to conversations with Chris Smith (see above), who was then Shadow Secretary of State for National Heritage. By contrast, the Conservatives remained intransigent in their unwillingness to reduce the financial burden of repair and maintenance further.[82]

While the HHA had enjoyed the personal sympathy of Thatcher, and the support of her cabinet in strengthening existing concessions, Major and his ministry (understandably) took the view that existing policy arrangements were sufficient to secure the continuation of private heritage. The HHA's belief that the Conservative Party was no longer on their side was, however, somewhat illogical. Major's government had done nothing to undermine private owners financially. Indeed, the eventual availability of HLF funding for private heritage was, symbolically, an enormous concession for country house owners—even if HLF trustees were reluctant to award grants to them in practice. By contrast, Labour MP's severe criticism of conditional exemption arrangements for historic buildings and amenity land in the early 1990s indicated that this system, which appeared to be politically neutral in the 1980s, might be significantly altered by a future Labour government.

[80] 'Britain's heritage 'safer with Labour'', *Sunday Telegraph* (13 Nov. 1994), p. 15.
[81] 'One Lets it All Hang Out', *Spectator* (16. Oct 1993), p. 16.
[82] 'Why Alice had to leave wonderland', *Independent* (3 Apr. 1995), p. 1.

The HHA were prepared for the new approach to lobbying that a potential Labour government required. In March 1997, shortly before the May election, the HHA executive team held a retreat to discuss their tactics for the next three years. They concluded that under a Labour government they ought to be wary of presenting their properties as successful business enterprises; their emphasis should be on 'owners as guardians of the heritage and at the forefront of the important and expanding tourism industry', as well as on employment, particularly in rural communities, and on education and training.[83] With this in mind, their tactic would be to attempt to win further concessions for historic house owners against (what they anticipated would be) a 'tightened' version of the existing tax regime.[84] There was no certainty which government would be most favourable: a Conservative government that had pledged to abolish both IHT and Capital Gains Tax at some point in the future, or a Labour government that viewed privately owned historic houses as significant cultural assets that were worthy of support—but only if they were accessible to the public.

[83] 'FPC retreat 1997: Summary of conclusions', Historic Houses Archives, p. 2.
[84] *Historic House*, spring 1997, p. 11.

Chapter Seven

‘Still in the era of crisis management’?
Celebrations and frustrations under New Labour, 1997–c. 2003

Despite the hopes of favourable treatment from the Labour party before the 1997 election, historic house owners feared that New Labour’s attitude toward British culture and heritage had caused them irreparable damage—both cultural and economic—a couple of years into Blair’s ministry. Martin Drury, Director General of the National Trust, told the HHA’s 1999 AGM that ‘at the end of a century, let alone of a millennium, and with a government committed to modernising Britain, a decline in the interest in the heritage was inevitable and predicted’.[1]

The new millennium saw marked overall increases in the number of visitors to Britain’s cultural attractions, but historic houses failed to keep pace. New Labour put increased public access to cultural institutions at the forefront of their agenda for the arts in the run up to the election, including a promise to introduce free admission to national museums. This was introduced in stages, and national museums became free to everyone in 2001. Visitor numbers to national museums increased by over 150 per cent over the following decade.[2] Simon Thurley later identified this increase as having a ripple effect on historic houses, contributing to a decline in their visitor numbers.[3] Thurley claimed that 1997, the year of the election, had been ‘the high watermark for visitor numbers to historic buildings’, which had thereafter declined.[4] His lecture’s title, ‘from boom to bust’, made plain his view that heritage in Britain had suffered since 1997. VisitBritain’s statistics for visitor numbers to historic houses and castles in England suggested a dramatic decline in visitor numbers between 1996 and 2001, following a decade in which numbers remained almost static.[5] The historic houses and castles that responded to VisitBritain’s survey,

[1] *Historic House*, spring 2000, Historic Houses Archives, p. 12.
[2] Time to count the cost of this museum revolution’, *Independent* (29 Nov. 2011), https://www.independent.co.uk/hei-fi/entertainment/time-count-cost-museum-revolution-6269432.html (16 Jul. 2021).
[3] S. Thurley, ‘From boom to bust: The politics of heritage 1997 to 2009’, lecture, 10 Dec. 2009, Museum of London: https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/from-boom-to-bust-the-politics-of-heritage-1997-to-2009 (2 May 2022).
[4] Thurley, ‘From boom to bust’.
[5] Note that these figures represent only the visitor attractions that responded to VisitBritain’s survey.

which represented a large (but unspecified) proportion of the industry, reported a decline from 99.5 million visitors in 1995/6, to 77.6 million visitors in 2004/5.[6] No other category of attractions (such as farms, gardens, theme parks, or zoos) saw a decrease in visitors. Historic houses and castles also reported the smallest revenue increase of all the categories: only three per cent.[7]

The rise of alternative leisure options was a principal cause of this decline in historic houses' popularity among potential visitors, but does not explain it entirely. Sunday trading had been legalised in 1994, and the rise of budget airlines such as easyJet (founded in 1995) resulted in greater numbers of British holidaymakers swapping a domestic holiday for a trip abroad. The outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD) in 2001 significantly affected tourism across Britain, and particularly areas with a high density of cattle farming such as Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway, and Northern Ireland.[8] Many country houses closed their doors to visitors after the outbreak of FMD, because remaining open would leave their estate's livestock vulnerable to the highly infectious disease. Although most cattle recovered, the economic worth of an animal that had contracted FMD was severely reduced. The government chose to focus on mitigating the long-term economic losses to the agricultural community by following a policy of containment and preventative slaughtering, which extended the damage to the tourism industry.[9] This crisis did not explain the immediate drop in visitors to historic houses that followed Labour's victory in 1997, however. The longer-term trends of increased alternative leisure opportunities and declining numbers of domestic holidaymakers cannot explain it either.

Thurley placed New Labour policy at the centre of the narrative of heritage's 'decline' after 1997, and he was not alone. Richard Wilkin, who became the HHA's Director General in 1996, believes that New Labour's policies were informed by an underlying ethos that 'the past didn't matter'.[10] The heritage industry was transformed under New Labour, although the transformation was firmly rooted in changes that had been initiated under Major, and (to a lesser

[6] VisitBritain, 'Visitor Attraction Trends England 2005' (London, 2006), p. 41.
[7] Ibid., p. 33.
[8] A. Blake, M. T. Sinclair and G. Sugiyarto, 'Quantifying the impact of foot and mouth disease on tourism and the UK economy', *Tourism Economics*, 9/4 (2003), p. 450.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Richard Wilkin, in conversation with the author on 10 July 2020.

extent) Thatcher. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the discord between the government's heritage-related priorities and those of English Heritage and the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), became increasingly evident. While the latter were convinced of the wider economic and social benefits of more favourable fiscal arrangements for privately owned historic houses, the government remained unmoved by any measure that might be portrayed as 'cash for toffs' by the press.[11]

This chapter will consider the political image of historic house heritage during Blair's first ministry, contextualised against the apparent political attacks on the aristocracy inherent in the foxhunting ban and House of Lords reform. The most significant policy issues in these years included the prolonged battle between government and the HHA over conditional exemption arrangements and the removal of One Estate Election. The HHA's celebrations of its twenty-fifth anniversary provide a final perspective on the status of privately owned country houses at the start of the new millennium.

Dropping 'heritage': country houses within the 'historic environment sector'

The Labour Party gained office on 2 May 1997, following a landslide victory in the general election that ended eighteen years of Conservative government. Tony Blair became the new Prime Minister, at the head of a Labour Party that was radically changed since it had last held power in the 1970s. Blair had altered Labour's course drastically with the abandonment of the original clause IV of the Party's constitution, stating the Party's commitment to state ownership of the means of production, in 1995. A statement of Labour's plans, co-written by Blair's close and influential adviser Peter Mandelson in 1996, included the statement that privatisation under the

[11] The phrase "cash for toffs" was used extensively in relation to the Royal Opera House's receipt of a HLF grant in 1995; see 'Royal Opera's lottery grant sparks cash for 'toffs' row', *Guardian* (21 Jul. 1995), p. 3. In 2004, it was repeated frequently by the press when Whitehall sources dismissed the idea of a tax relief scheme for private owners who donated artworks to museums as 'cash for toffs'; see 'Tax breaks urged for art donors to save museums', *Times* (16 Jan. 2004), p. 12.

previous Conservative governments had led to 'increased productivity', and 'brought about improvements in operating efficiency and facilitated new investment'.[12] This was a revision of the fundamental tenets of Labour politics. Labour's 1997 election manifesto explained that New Labour was 'a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology' and would subsequently move away from political binaries such as 'public versus private, bosses versus workers, middle class versus working class', because they had 'no relevance whatsoever to the modern world'.[13] Consequently, Blair was seen as a firmly centrist figure, combining an emphasis on social justice with economic policies that would not significantly disrupt the new economic order established by the Conservatives.[14]

The first New Labour budget in July 1997 was described as 'one that could equally have been delivered by a Conservative Chancellor' by HHA President William Proby. Although Proby anticipated damaging Inheritance Tax (IHT) reform in a future budget, he was reassured that its absence from the new government's first budget demonstrated that they did not view it as a priority.[15] No changes to Capital Gains Tax (CGT) were announced, as the government was undergoing consultations on the issue.[16] Moreover, Labour had made a pre-election commitment not to increase income tax rates during their tenure.[17] Proby gave an optimistic forecast of the Blair government's approach to privately owned heritage, both reminding HHA members of Labour's track record of enacting legislation in their favour and highlighting New Labour's willingness to work with the private sector in 'partnerships', an approach that the HHA had championed under Major.

The removal of the word 'heritage' from the title of the new Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which replaced the Department of National Heritage, appeared

[12] P. Mandelson and R. Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?* (London, 1996), quoted in S. Milne, 'My Millbank', *London Review of Books*, 18/8 (18 Apr. 1996), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v18/n08/seumas-milne/my-millbank (12 May 2022).
[13] 'new Labour because Britain deserves better', http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml (1 Feb. 2022).
[14] D. Kavanagh, 'The Blair Premiership' in A. Seldon (ed) *Blair's Britain, 1997–2007* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 3–15.
[15] *Historic House*, autumn 1997, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[16] Hansard, HC Deb 2 July 1997, vol 297, c306.
[17] R. Whiting, *The Labour Party and Taxation: Party Identity and Political Purpose in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 259.

ominous to country house owners. When asked about this departmental transformation in 2020, the name was the first thing that Chris Smith, the DCMS' first Secretary, mentioned: he stated that the removal of the word 'heritage' did not signify its demotion in importance.[18] Speaking at the HHA's AGM in November 1997, he attempted to reassure his audience that the name change was not a cause for concern, and said that his department was 'still very much concerned with preserving Britain's heritage', but he believed the department needed 'in general, to adopt a forward looking strategy about how best to conserve our heritage and present it and interpret it and leave it for future generations, rather than simply have a retrospective view'.[19] However, when speaking on the same subject in an interview in 2009, Smith implied that he had sought to minimise the role of heritage in the new department:

> … heritage is obviously a very important element of what DCMS does, but it's only one element amongst a huge number and the name simply didn't reflect the spread or the modernity of what the department was about ... the things that it was engaged in, television, lottery, the arts, sport and these were all things that mattered hugely to citizens and yet it had been sort of languishing in the doldrums very much at the edge of Government, so I wanted to put it more centre stage. But I also, thirdly, wanted to give it much more of a sense that it was part not just of the aesthetics of society, but of the economy of society, that the importance of the creative industries was something that Government needed to wake up to.[20]

In the DCMS select committee, Smith had said that 'the old name was 'backward-looking and did not do justice to the range of work we cover'', whereas the new name 'was more suited to a 'Department of the future' which was "about creativity, innovation and excitement"'.[21] Simon Thurley is among those who claim that heritage was not given a role in DCMS.[22] The reality is, of course, more complex.

When writing to Mark Fisher, the new Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for DCMS, in September 1997, William Proby emphasised his objective to 'work towards a partnership

[18] Chris Smith, in conversation with the author on 17 September 2020.
[19] *Historic House*, spring 1998, Historic Houses Archives, p. 9.
[20] S. Hetherington, 'The Rationales of New Labour's Cultural Policy 1997–2001' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2014), p. 96.
[21] *Parl Pap.* (1997/98), HC 741, 'Objectives and performance of the Department for Culture Media and Sport: Fifth report with proceedings and evidence', viii.
[22] Thurley, 'From boom to bust'.

approach with Government'.[23] Simultaneously, he warned HHA members of a need for concerted action with the Country Landowners Association (CLA), English Heritage and the National Trust (NT), and a need to promote a consistently positive public image. Under the new government, he suggested, the public relevance of the organisation would be more important than ever.[24] Demonstrating this public relevance in the late 1990s was a particular challenge for the HHA's leadership, who believed that New Labour were actively hostile towards anything that contributed to a nostalgic image of Britain. This perception did not last for long; in the summer of 1999 the HHA's new President, the Earl of Leicester, recorded his relief that the mood had changed:

> Thank heavens "Cool Britannia" and the belief that anything old or that smacks of tradition is outmoded and of no use seems to be dying a quiet death.[25]

In the meantime, however, Blair's apparent aversion to the past in the earliest years of his tenure as Prime Minister shocked many in the heritage sector. Looking back on a time when she was Director of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Fiona Reynolds wrote that the Labour government 'seemed to believe that history had begun in May 1997, the date of its election'.[26] Blair repeatedly emphasised that New Labour was focused on the future, and not on the past. In his election victory speech, he spoke of the popular vote as 'not a mandate for dogma or for doctrine, or for a return to the past, but … a mandate to get those things done in our country that desperately need doing for the future'.[27] In the Millennium Dome—a project initiated by Major's government that would become a political disaster for New Labour by the millennium—there was an absence of content focused on Britain's history in its public exhibitions.[28] However, the government's critics, such as Fiona Reynolds, were unable to point to targeted funding cuts for historic houses; Blair's rhetorical hostility towards heritage remained almost entirely rhetorical.

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[23] Letter to Mark Fisher from William Proby, 18 Sep. 1997, Historic Houses Archives.
[24] *Historic House*, autumn 1997, p. 5.
[25] *Historic House*, summer 1999, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[26] F. Reynolds, *The fight for beauty: Our path to a better future* (London, 2016), p. 255.
[27] 'General election victory speech, 1997', http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=222 (3 Mar. 2022).
[28] For instance, Abigail Gilmore has commented that in the 'Work zone' of the exhibition the focus was 'futurological', 'its focus on labour present and future and its account of the history of labour in the UK shallow and nominal'. A. Gilmore, "That was then – this is now', Old Work and New Labour in the Work Zone, the Millennium Dome', *Labour History Review*, 68/2 (2003), p. 253.

Much of this rhetoric appears to have been rooted in Hewison's critique of the heritage industry under Thatcher.[29] Echoes of Hewison's view of popular interest in heritage as symptomatic of Britain's global decline were present in Mark Leonard's pamphlet entitled *BritainTM: renewing our identity*, which was published by the think tank Demos in 1997. Leonard's argument that Britain's image required 'rebranding' has been called the 'intellectual underpinning' of 'Cool Britannia'.[30] This goes too far. Many of the features of the 'new Britain' that the phrase Cool Britannia embodies emerged before 1997, such as the Britpop movement.[31] Blair had laid out his vision of a 'young country' in 1995: New Labour had long been poised to hijack the concept, but it did not originate with them.[32] Nevertheless, Leonard's pamphlet was undoubtedly influential within the Labour party, and its opening statement demonstrates how heritage attractions (most particularly rural ones) were seen to embody an outmoded vision of Britain from which the party must distance itself:

> Britain is seen as a backward-looking has-been, a theme park world of royal pageantry and rolling green hills, where draughts blow through people's houses.[33]

A rebranded Britain was characterised as much by what it sought to distance itself from as by what it sought to celebrate. Julian Barnes' elaboration of the idea of Britain as a heritage theme park in his novel *England, England* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1998. The story mocked England's willingness to create pastiches of English historical 'traditions' for profit. Commenting on Barnes' novel, Andrew Marr claimed that England's status as a 'theme-park nation' was a 'chattering-class cliche'.[34] However, Barnes did not appear to exonerate New

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[29] See Chapter Five.
[30] Thurley, 'From boom to bust: The politics of heritage 1997 to 2009'.
[31] Britpop's highpoint was in 1995, when Blur won four Brit Awards for their album *Parklife*. Their song *Country House*, based on their former manager who quit his job and moved to a big house in the country, came out that same year and beat Oasis' *Roll with It* to number one in the UK singles chart. See: J. Harris, *The Last Party: Britpop, Blair and the Demise of English Rock* (London, 2003), pp. xiii–xvii.
[32] See Blair's speech to the Labour party conference in 1995: 'I want us to be a young country again with a common purpose, ideals we cherish and live up to, not resting on past glories, fighting old battles and sitting back, hand on mouth, concealing a yawn of cynicism…'. 'Leader's speech, Brighton 1995', http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=201 (2 May 2022); Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (London, 1996).
[33] Mark Leonard, *Britain TM: Renewing our Identity* (London, 1997).
[34] 'England, England by Julian Barnes', *Observer* (30 Aug. 1998), https://www.theguardian.com/books/1998/aug/30/fiction.julianbarnes1 (4 Feb. 2022).

Labour for its part in the creation of theme-park England; Sir Jack, the character who buys the Isle of Wight to turn it into a condensed version of England for tourists, is a cartoonish businessman that some critics have likened to Rupert Murdoch (a man for whom Barnes had worked, and hated).[35] Given New Labour's close ties with Murdoch, Blair's government was tainted by association with the charges that Barnes levelled against his caricature of a protagonist: a willingness to sacrifice national character for profit.

DCMS was certainly a far more commercial operation than its predecessors, and had less direct control of expenditure than any of its previous iterations. It met its objectives primarily 'through a network of sponsored bodies'; approximately ninety-five per cent of the Department's programme expenditure was spent by non-departmental public bodies (or quangos), including the Arts Council, National Lottery Commission and English Heritage.[36] This was a continuation of the pre-existing 'arm's length principle' whereby Ministers 'set the financial, administrative, legal, and overall policy framework for the public bodies, but the bodies themselves [had] a considerable measure of independence in individual decision-making'.[37] A review of DCMS' relationship with its quangos in 1999 noted that the principle 'long predates the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and indeed its predecessor the Department of National Heritage'.[38] The resulting report acknowledged that the 'arms-length principle' had its critics, both within government and among 'cultural' agencies that sought government funding, but DCMS Secretary Chris Smith was among its strong supporters. Quangos often made decisions at a level of complexity that would 'swamp' DCMS, he remarked, and were typically staffed by individuals with exceptional expertise in the relevant area. Moreover, most witnesses, including Smith, cited

[35] 'Julian Barnes, the Booker, and the phrase he most regrets writing', *New Yorker* (19 Oct. 2011), https://www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/julian-barnes-the-booker-and-the-phrase-he-most-regrets-writing (3 Dec. 2021); 'Tomorrowland', *New York Times* (9 May 1999), https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/09/books/tomorrowland.html (3 Dec. 2021).
[36] *Parl Pap.* (1998/99), HC 506, 'The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and its Quangos: Volume I: Report and Proceedings of the Committee', p. v.
[37] Ibid., p. v.
[38] Ibid., p. v.

the desirability of decisions over arts funding retaining an element of independence from the 'political preferences of the Government of the day'.[39]

New Labour focused on the instrumental value of culture and the arts, justifying the importance of bodies and projects supported by DCMS through reference to their educational, economic, and social benefits.[40] In this capacity, the new government's approach was an extension of the Major government's approach to heritage; for example, the 1997 National Heritage Act, enacted in March, just before Major left office, had emphasised public benefit in its guidelines for Heritage Lottery Fund spending.[41] Relative independence enabled quangos to be strategic in demonstrating their own relevance to government policy. As Rob Lennox has shown, English Heritage's 1997 discussion paper, 'Sustaining the historic environment: new perspectives on the future', focused on the societal value of their work to resonate with the new cultural agenda.[42] In this political climate, it was insufficient to argue that privately owned country houses ought to be preserved for the benefit of future generations because they, as entities, represented an important facet of British history. In order to justify state support, owners needed to demonstrate that their houses were valuable assets to their local communities and economies.

Despite the inextricable association of country houses with backward-looking heritage, the hotly contested political issues of foxhunting and House of Lords reform demonstrated that the instrumental value of country houses had been successfully separated from the wider question of the modern status of the aristocracy. Labour's election manifesto had promised a free vote on a hunting ban, but it was a low priority for the new government. The Labour leadership feared that concentration on what they considered a minor issue would interfere with their ambitious reform programme.[43] Foxhunting was, however, a preoccupation of several Labour backbenchers.

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[39] Ibid., p. vi.
[40] S. Selwood, 'John Holden's Capturing Cultural Value: How Culture has Become a Tool of Government Policy', *Cultural Trends,* 14/1 (2005), p. 113.
[41] See National Heritage Act 1997, c. 14, section 1, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/14/section/1/enacted (2 May 2022); R. Hewison and J. Holden, 'Challenge and Change: HLF and Cultural Value: A report to the Heritage Lottery Fund' (London, 2004), p. 14.
[42] R. Lennox, *Heritage and Politics in the Public Value Era: An Analysis of the Historic Environment Sector, the Public, and the State in England since 1997*, (PhD, University of York, 2016), p. 73.
[43] E. Griffin, *Blood Sport: Hunting in Britain since 1066* (London, 2008), pp. 219–20.

One of those backbenchers, Michael Foster, used his opportunity to introduce a private members' bill to compel the Commons to vote on a ban early in New Labour's first term. The second reading of his bill, in November 1997, was carried on 411 votes to 151; it was the largest anti-hunting vote yet in parliament's history.[44] However, the bill ran out of time during its report stage in March 1998, as a result of Conservative filibustering in the Commons and a march against the bill that was attended by approximately a quarter of a million protesters.[45] The march was organised by the Countryside Alliance, an organisation that appeared to have come out of nowhere to campaign against the bill in 1997, but had been formed of the British Field Sports Society, the Countryside Business Group, and the Countryside Movement. The British Field Sports Society itself had been formed between the wars in order to lobby against a hunting ban, and the other two organisations stemmed from it.[46] The Countryside Alliance positioned itself as defending the general interests of the countryside, but its initial purpose was the prevention of the hunting ban. In a Mori poll of the march attendees, forty per cent gave fox hunting or hunting with dogs as the single main reason for being there, twenty-eight per cent said they were marching primarily for the rights of rural people, and twelve per cent gave farming generally: i.e., not everyone in attendance was motivated by a desire to prevent a hunting ban.[47]

Although another Mori poll put the proportion of the public that supported the ban at seventy-one per cent,[48] the march was enough to scare the government away from reform; Historian Emma Griffin believes that it was the reason that the bill failed in Labour's first term.[49] After the House of Lords rejected either an outright ban or government regulation of blood sports in January 2001, and several years of stalling subsequently, a foxhunting ban finally became law in 2004 under the Hunting with Dogs Act. The issue may have seemed insignificant when

[44] Hansard, HC Deb 28 November 1997, vol 301, cc1199–272; Griffin, *Blood Sport*, p. 220.
[45] A. N. May, *The Fox-Hunting Controversy, 1781-2004: Class and Cruelty* (Farnham, 2013), p. 143; Griffin, *Blood Sport*, p. 223.
[46] May, *The Fox-Hunting Controversy*, p. 131.
[47] Ipsos, 'The Countryside March - Who Was Really There?', 1 Mar. 1998, https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/countryside-march-who-was-really-there (4 Dec. 2021).
[48] Ipsos, 'Hunting – To Ban or not to Ban', 1 Jul. 1997, https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/hunting-ban-or-not-ban (1 Dec. 2021).
[49] Griffin, *Blood Sport*, p. 223.

compared to New Labour's ambitious social reform programme, but, as Griffin points out, 'most of the broadsheets devoted more column inches between 1997 and 2004 to the future of hunting than to the government's child poverty agenda', and Parliament spent 700 hours debating fox hunting in the same period.[50] Clearly, this was as much about the symbolic importance of fox hunting as it was its morality.

Throughout all this public debate, the HHA remained resolutely detached from the issue. At the HHA's 1997 AGM, President William Proby stated that the Association did not intend to become involved in discussions surrounding foxhunting. Defending this decision to an unhappy member, Christopher Thompson (owner of Aldenham House in Shropshire), Richard Wilkin (HHA's Director General) explained that 'becoming involved in this issue would seriously divert our slender resources from activities that are far more important for the preservation of the houses themselves'. He quoted the Association's mission statement to explain that 'the Association concentrates on measures to preserve the fabric of the houses and their gardens, rather than to represent owners' personal interests that are not directly associated with the maintenance of the house and garden'. This was not merely a question of resources; the HHA knew that their legitimacy as a heritage organisation depended on their refusal to weigh in on issues that were not directly related to preservation.

The same principle applied to the HHA's stance on House of Lords reform. Labour had been committed to reforming the Upper House since their 1987–1990 policy review under Neil Kinnock.[51] Blair, as opposition leader, committed the party to a two-stage reform process, whereby Labour would first remove most hereditary peers and later decide how Upper House membership more broadly would be determined without them. Like a hunting ban, this reform was not a top priority for Labour once in power; the government waited for the Second Session of the 1997 Parliament to begin the reform process.[52] In order to secure stage one, the government eventually agreed that ninety-two (i.e. approximately ten per cent of) hereditary peers would

[50] Ibid., p. 230.
[51] P. Dorey and A. Kelso, *House of Lords Reform since 1911: Must the Lords Go?* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 25.
[52] C. Ballinger, *The House of Lords 1911–2011: A Century of Non-Reform* (London, 2012), pp. 166–7.

remain in place until a plan for their replacement was agreed.[53] This compromise was established under the Weatherill amendment of the bill that became the 1999 House of Lords Act.[54] Peter Dorey and Alexandra Kelso have stated that, in hindsight, the two-stage approach appears to have been a 'clear and conscious plan by Blair to avoid the establishment of an elected House of Lords'; once the majority of hereditary peers had been removed, Labour's main criticism of the House—and therefore the urgency to move forward with reform—was resolved.[55] The second stage of reform never materialised under Blair, and ninety-two hereditary peers remain in the House of Lords in 2022.

The expulsion of hereditary peers was even further removed from the HHA's purview than the hunting ban. The HHA made no public statements on Upper House reform, including in their members' magazine. For several of the HHA's founders, their own hereditary peerages had been central to their identities when they formed the association in the 1970s. Lord Montagu viewed his position in the Lords as a solemn responsibility and spoke in the Upper House frequently. However, the Association's purpose of protecting houses rather than their owners was clearer in the 1990s than it had ever been; the removal of hereditary peerages may have, superficially, undermined the (by now, faint) existence of the aristocracy as a social class, but it had no bearing on the future of country houses.

Conditional Exemption revisited

Following the *Guardian* 'exposé' of the conditional exemption scheme in 1992, which was briefly a subject of debate in the Commons, the reprieve from criticism of the scheme was short-lived. The issue returned to the public's attention in 1996. Potential changes to the scheme affected a

[53] Dorey and Kelso, *House of Lords Reform since 1911*, pp. 25–28.
[54] 'The Weatherill Amendment: elected hereditary peers (updated Oct. 2009)', House of Lords Library Note, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2009-008/LLN-2009-008.pdf (5 Dec. 2021).
[55] Dorey and Kelso, *House of Lords Reform since 1911*, 26.

relatively large number of historic house owners: there were 766 owners of conditionally exempt chattels, and between them they owned 67,000 items that had been exempted since 1976.[56] Of these, 21,000 objects were available to view on appointment. The remaining items were either on long term loan to museums, or on view in houses that were already open to visitors.[57] In 1999, the Committee of Public Accounts stated that some £760 million in tax had been deferred under the heritage exemption scheme between 1984 and 1998.[58] An exemption arrangement was made anew for each exempt item or building when that property was transferred or inherited, and therefore each exemption arrangement would only secure the property within a family for one generation at most. When politicians pledged to reform the system to prevent the alleged abuses with which it was associated, many country house owners feared that they would no longer be able to meet the conditions to retain their tax exemption. The payment of the foregone tax that would become due, or the sale of the exempted assets, represented a significant blow to the immediate future of many estates.

The comedian Mark Thomas is credited with the revival in public and political interest in the scheme, as he sought to highlight (what he claimed were) widespread abuses of exemption between 1996 and 1998 in his televised comedy shows. In 'The Mark Thomas Comedy Product', Thomas documented his attempts to access conditionally exempt works of art on the register. The first programme addressing tax exempt artworks aired in March 1996, and the final programme featuring the issue was broadcast in March 1998. Thomas filmed his attempts to arrange viewings of several exempt art objects for himself and large groups of volunteers. On multiple occasions he was denied access, and on others he was presented with exacting conditions that appeared designed to deter viewing. His efforts to view a piece of furniture owned by Evelyn de Rothschild culminated in de Rothschild paying tax on 350 conditionally exempt items to escape access

[56] Agreements with regard to houses and land made before 1975 did not carry any obligations for public access.
See: Letter from Richard Wilkin to house members, 3 Feb. 1998, Historic Houses Archives.
[57] *Historic House*, spring 2000, p. 5.
[58] *Parl Pap.* (1998/99), HC 474, 'Committee of Public Accounts, Thirty-eighth Report: Inheritance Tax: A Progress Report', p. vi.

obligations.[59] In another incident, Earl Haig told the House of Lords that he had contacted the television complaints commission after a taped telephone conversation between himself and Thomas, in which they discussed whether Thomas could view Haig's art collection, was featured on the show. Haig noted that he had been 'pressurised by people in television and by journalists who ring me up pretending to be genuine students of art', and blamed journalists for creating public resentment by failing 'to acknowledge the advantages to the public'.[60] Thomas' access attempts gained greater publicity when Channel 4 hired him to present an episode of their popular current affairs programme, *Dispatches*, which aired on 13 November 1997.[61] The *Independent* described the programme as exposing 'tax dodge toffs', and quoted Thomas explaining that it was not the principle of the scheme to which he objected, but the failure to execute it:

> "In theory the scheme is a fair deal," Thomas says. "But at the moment it is riddled with stupidity and malpractice. It's worth remembering that many more people visit stately homes every year than attend live theatre performances. You're talking about an enormous amount of people who should be enjoying this scheme. But no one is accountable, and the bottom line is that people are being cheated out of their money."[62]

However, private historic house owners felt that Thomas' methods of publicising flaws of the scheme were unnecessarily disrespectful. In one incident featured in the *Dispatches* programme, Thomas transported coachloads of locals to Bradley House, the Duke of Somerset's house in Wiltshire, after discovering that they were unaware of their right to request viewing access to the house. He also flew a balloon displaying the Duke's telephone number over the area and encouraged viewers to call his 'tip off a toff' hotline to expose others who failed to meet their obligations.[63] Thomas' efforts were effective in putting conditional exemption reform on the new government's agenda.

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[59] 'Number Stations', *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product*, dir. Michael Cumming (TV programme, 4 Mar. 1998).
[60] Hansard, HL Deb 26 May 1999, vol 601, c1024.
[61] 'TV week', *Sunday Mirror* (9 Nov. 1997), p. 52.
[62] 'Comic Mark exposes 'tax dodge toffs'', *Independent* (9 Nov. 1997), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/comic-mark-exposes-tax-dodge-toffs-1292986.html (21 Nov. 2021).
[63] Ibid.

In response, the HHA highlighted the advantages of the scheme for the government. However, they could not allay the criticism that it had ceased to function perfectly. William Proby laid out the HHA's stance on the issue in their 1997 AGM:

> First, all the evidence is that the vast majority of owners are honouring not only the letter but the spirit of their undertakings. Indeed, we in the Association have constantly urged them so to do because it is vital that the scheme continues to get the support of the public. The second point is that the scheme is one of tax deferment. The idea that people are getting away with tax avoidance on a massive scale is absurd. The scheme can be likened to taking a mortgage from the Government: if you don't honour your obligations you have to pay the money back and because of the way that the scheme works the sum you pay will often be many times the tax originally deferred.[64]

Although, in principle, there were checks in place to ensure that the obligations of exemption were met, the government was persuaded that these checks were failing. In a special report reviewing the effectiveness of Inheritance Tax in 1999, the Committee of Public Accounts noted that only 'just over one third of the 130 expected five-yearly formal inspections of heritage land and buildings were completed [by the Inland Revenue] in the period 1995 to 1997'. The Committee further commented that they were 'disturbed' by the Revenue's 'failure to carry out even basic checks'.[65] However, the government's review of Conditional Exemption extended beyond an assessment of its monitoring procedures to the requirements that houses would be expected to meet for qualification. While nobody disputed the importance that owners of exempt objects honour their obligations, there was widespread criticism when stricter obligations were proposed.

Mark Thomas' programmes were widely credited as the cause of the pledge to reform conditional exemption that was announced in the budget on 18 March 1998. Richard Wilkin (HHA Director General) informed HHA house members that the Association believed Vera Productions (the company that made the *Dispatches* programme for Channel 4) were collaborating with The Ramblers (a group that consistently campaigned for rights of way on private land) in order to exert pressure on the government in advance of the 1998 budget.[66] Wilkin

[64] *Historic House*, spring 1998, p. 7.
[65] *Parl Pap.* (1998/99), HC 474, p. vii.
[66] Letter from Richard Wilkin to house members, 3 Feb. 1998.

assured the membership that the HHA had already made 'energetic representations' on the subject, in co-ordination with the CLA. The CLA took the lead in arguing the case for restricting access to agricultural land, and the HHA focused on access to houses, parks, and gardens. However, the HHA's concerns regarding the safety of owners and the security of their assets were not allayed by the announcement on 'better public access to heritage assets' released by the Inland Revenue on 17 March. Future undertakings of conditional exemption would be 'open to subsequent changes made with the consent of the owner or a Special Commissioner', and owners 'may be required to publicise their undertakings and disclose any other information relevant to public access'.[67] This reference to the disclosure of relevant information was a particular concern for the HHA, who argued that historic houses were vulnerable to break-ins and thefts.

The HHA and their allies believed that attempts to make the list of conditionally exempt items more accessible since 1992 had already caused an increase in thefts. The register of exempted chattels for which a viewing appointment was required had been made available online in December 1996. This had, ironically, made it easier for Mark Thomas' programme to determine houses and objects to feature. Lord Montagu claimed that 'in 1997 alone items valued at £1.8 million were stolen from 259 historic houses'.[68] Targeted robberies of privately owned country houses had been a serious problem for owners for over a decade. Sir Thomas Ingilby of Ripley Castle founded a Stately Homes Hotline to prevent thefts from historic houses, after he was the victim of a robbery in 1988, and a series of five thefts from historic houses in the space of a month hit the headlines in 1994.[69] In a House of Lords debate in May 1999, several historic-house-owning lords complained of the dangers to individuals living in secluded places created by proposed extensions to existing access requirements. Lord Chesham described it as 'an impossible situation for owners who do not live in a house which is normally open to the public'.[70] These fears were heightened by frequent enquiries that owners of exempt items began to receive from

[67] Inland Revenue Press Office, 'Budget 98: Inheritance Tax: Better public access to heritage assets', 17 Mar. 1998, p. 2.
[68] HL Deb 26 May 1999, vol 601, c1021.
[69] 'Country house owners on alert as art thieves strike again', *Independent* (26 May 1994), p. 2.
[70] HL Deb 26 May 1999, vol 601, c1026.

journalists mimicking Thomas' attempts to expose tax evasion. As a result, with the threat of conditional exemption reform looming and the sense that they were being hounded by the press, many historic house owners felt under attack in the late 1990s.

The HHA feared that the upcoming reform would be financially catastrophic for many of its members. The wording of the commitment to reform included in the Budget was deliberately vague, as the Inland Revenue had not yet established the full implications of possible reform routes:

> Conditional exemption for heritage assets will be reformed: tax relief for chattels will generally be limited to items of pre-eminent quality (for transfers on or after 17 March 1998); tighter conditions will apply to owner's undertakings on various matters, including public access to tax exempt assets.[71]

The requirement that chattels were classified as pre-eminent to qualify from 17 March 1998 did not provoke as much immediate protest as the commitment to tighten conditions of public access.[72] Partly, this was because the changes to existing public access arrangements would be retrospective, requiring owners to adapt to situations that they had not anticipated when originally committing themselves to postponing the payment of tax. The new classification requirement was, however, a highly significant change. In July 1999, Sotheby's estimated that a maximum of five per cent of chattels that then qualified for exempt status (as 'museum quality' objects) would be accepted as 'pre-eminent' under the terms of the 1998 Finance Act.[73] Other taxation changes in the 1998 Act negatively affected private owners, including an increase in tax rates on income from Trusts and Estates, disallowing some agricultural and property-related companies from qualifying for reinvestment relief, and the increase in stamp duty on the sale of assets over £250,000.[74] However, the projected reform of access requirements to conditionally exempt objects and properties was a far greater immediate threat to a wider range of estates.

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[71] *Parl Pap.* (1996/97), HC 90, 'Financial Statement and Budget Report 1998', clause 5.71.
[72] Criticism of this aspect of the 1998 budget specifically will be discussed later in the chapter.
[73] 'Chattels rules may backfire', *Antiques Trade Gazette* (12 Jul. 1999), https://www.antiquestradegazette.com/news/1999/chattels-rules-may-backfire/ (6 Sep. 2021).
[74] '1998 Budget Proposals', 20 Mar. 1998, Historic Houses Archives.

In the HHA's *Historic House* magazine of that summer, President William Proby told members that the HHA felt it was 'unrealistic to expect that many owners will be able to offer the kind of extended access that is required'. Moreover, retrospective changes were 'to be deplored' as 'they will inevitably lower owners' confidence in the whole system of Conditional Exemption since owners will feel that if undertakings, once agreed, can be altered without their consent it would be better to avoid the system altogether'.[75] Specifically, the tighter conditions applying to public access included the abolition of the 'viewing by appointment' system utilised by properties for which regular public opening was unsustainable. A potential minimum of twenty-five days of open access (i.e., requiring no appointment) was discussed and, after the Budget announcement, owners expected that they would have to meet this requirement, although it was not specifically included in the relevant clause. Owners of houses that were open by appointment only told the press that adapting to the changes would prove impossible for them. In a letter to the editor of *Country Life*, Diana Boston, the owner of a small twelfth-century manor house in Hemingford Grey, Cambridgeshire, claimed that the size of her house and the capacity of the local parking arrangements made opening without appointment untenable. It would not only cause her logistical problems, but severely affect the local village.[76]

Supporters of conditional exemption reform believed that they had successfully closed a tax loophole in 1998, but negotiations continued for several years. Speaking about the changes in March 1999, Mark Thomas said:

> The Labour government then did a U-turn and changed the law. It's very nice to get your name down in Hansard for changing the law. It's even nicer when the people who work at the Historic Houses Association, the trade body of the stately homes, describe my actions as irresponsible and say their members will suffer, and I am personally to blame. I wear that badge with pride.[77]

However, the Labour government was quietly doing another 'U-turn' to aid the historic houses owners who could not sustain open public access. Crucially, it was not only the HHA who

[75] *Historic House*, summer 1998, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[76] 'See how the law threatens historic houses', *Country Life* (2 Sep. 1999), p. 92.
[77] 'No doubting Thomas', *Socialist Review*, 228 (March 1999).

campaigned for greater leniency in the reformed guidelines. In May, a submission from the Museums and Galleries Commission urged the government to retain appointment by viewing, and the Inland Revenue to take the individual conditions of items into account.[78] The NT urged the government to adopt 'a flexible and modulated application of the rules'.[79] The HHA were most persistent, however, and at the end of 1999 Lord Leicester (the new HHA President) informed their members that the HHA had spent 'most of this year' explaining the dangers of the new legislation to the Inland Revenue and government.[80] Although progress was slow, the Inland Revenue consistently met with the HHA and listened to their views.[81] By now well-practised in seeking support from a wide range of actors in government and the civil service, the HHA wrote to and met with several key MPs and senior civil servants to influence the implementation of the clauses regarding conditional exemption. Those MPs included Quentin Davies, a Conservative member of the Treasury Committee; Stuart Bell, the Second Church Commissioner; Mark Fisher, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for DCMS; and, most importantly, Dawn Primarolo, Financial Secretary to the Treasury. Lobbied civil servants included Mick Downs, the HMRC specialist responsible for IHT reliefs for historic houses; Brian Mace, Director of the Savings and Investment Division and Capital and Valuation Division in the Inland Revenue; and DCMS officials Michael Helston, Nigel Pittman, and Robin Young.[82] Given that Mick Downs became the HHA's tax advisor when he retired from HMRC and joined accountancy firm Saffery Champness in 2012, it is likely that he was sympathetic to their arguments in the late 1990s.[83]

There is no evidence that the Labour leadership was much concerned with conditional exemption reform at this time. Personally, Blair was firmly focused on the Northern Ireland peace process in the spring of 1998, as the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement was being hashed out. For the remainder of his first term, he was preoccupied with Britain's international standing and

[78] 'Submission on Finance Bill Clauses dealing with changes to terms of Conditional Exemption', 28 May 1998, knHistoric Houses Archives, p. 4.
[79] *Historic House*, spring 2000, p. 15.
[80] Ibid., p. 6.
[81] *Historic House*, spring 1999, Historic Houses Archives, p. 12.
[82] 'Budget 1998 proposals – distribution list of briefing', Historic Houses Archives.
[83] 'Mick Downs', https://www.saffery.com/our-people/mick-downs (8 Dec. 2021).

involvement in global affairs, including the war in Kosovo and Iraq's potential harbouring of Weapons of Mass Destruction.[84] Domestically, he was attempting extensive reform of health, education, and law and order in his quest to lead 'one of the great, radical, reforming governments of our history'.[85] It is likely that the relative unimportance of conditional exemption from the government's perspective enabled the civil service to set the agenda on the issue, and the HHA was able to draw on their well-established relationships with Treasury and Inland Revenue officials to greater effect.

Eventually, the Inland Revenue and the HHA appear to have concluded that it was in their mutual best interest to ensure that an agreement was reached relatively quietly. Owners were encouraged to inform the Revenue of what constituted reasonable access to their objects, and cases continued to be decided individually. The blanket approach of requiring a minimum annual opening period of twenty-five days was therefore abandoned. Although Christopher Leslie, Labour MP for Shipley, predicted that the removal of the 'loophole' in the tax system would have been 'met with wide public acclaim—almost delight',[86] there was no public outcry against a more flexible 'tightening' of the rules. The Inland Revenue were responsible for the practicalities of the system, and therefore the elected government had little involvement in the crucial details of interpretation of the new rules. Edward Harley, Chairman of the HHA's Political and Taxation Committee, implied this dynamic when he explained in summer 1999 that 'the Inland Revenue is clearly striving to make the new rules workable within the confines of the change in law made by the 1998 Finance Act'.[87]

[84] See S. B. Dyson, *The Blair Identity: Leadership and Foreign Policy* (Manchester, 2009).
[85] Seldon, *Blair*, p. 704; 'Leader's speech, Brighton 1995'.
[86] Hansard, HC Deb 1 July 1998, vol 315, cc404–5.
[87] *Historic House*, summer 1999, p. 11.

The problem of maintenance costs

Another important aspect of the 1998 Budget was the proposed abolition of One Estate Election (OEE). OEE affected a small number of houses, as it was available for a short time only in the 1960s. However, it was of enormous significance to those houses that had committed to it, as it enabled owners to offset expenditure on repairs and maintenance against other estate rental income for tax purposes. Its abolition meant that the cost of maintenance and repairs for affected owners would rise by forty per cent, because these costs would now be paid from taxed income. Giles Worsley claimed that the financial viability of nearly sixty important houses, most of them Grade I listed buildings, was at risk.[88] An HHA survey in 1998 received sixty-four responses from member houses with OEE, suggesting that the total figure was slightly higher.[89] Among those affected were several houses that attracted large numbers of visitors, including Bowood House, Wiltshire; Glynde Place, Sussex; Knebworth House, Hertfordshire; and Broughton Castle, Oxfordshire. These houses were all HHA members. Rockingham Castle, which belonged to a previous President of the HHA, Michael Saunders Watson, was among those threatened.[90] In highlighting the dangers of OEE's abolition to the press, the HHA emphasised that these houses collectively attracted three million visitors annually.[91] Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Conservative MP of the newly created Cotswold constituency, was reported to be 'leading the campaign for a Government rethink' of OEE within Parliament.[92] Unable to reach a compromise before the budget was announced, the government agreed to delay the abolition of OEE for three years. A few days after the Budget announcement, Richard Wilkin, the HHA's Director General, informed HHA members that the delay was 'the direct result of representations by the Association and the CLA', and the HHA would 'be tabling a Parliamentary Amendment to argue for an equivalent compensation'.[93]

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[88] 'Historic houses threatened by end of tax break', *Telegraph* (23 May 1998), p. 9.
[89] *Historic House*, autumn 1998, Historic Houses Archives, p. 9.
[90] 'Tax change threatens stately homes', *Times* (23 May 1998), p. 1.
[91] 'Tax threat to stately homes', *Sunday Times* (14 Jun. 1998) p. 4.
[92] 'Historic houses threatened by end of tax break', *Telegraph* (23 May 1998), p. 9.
[93] '1998 Budget Proposals'.

The HHA took the opportunity of the postponement of OEE abolition to pursue a new targeted relief from income tax on the maintenance of historic houses. William Proby, HHA President, announced their intention to propose an alternative policy in the winter 1998 edition of *Historic House* magazine. Proby reported that the Paymaster General had 'encouraged' the HHA to 'suggest a targeted relief which would encourage access to and promote the economic contribution of historic houses'.[94] The HHA's proposed replacement relief was initially referred to internally as the Listed Buildings Maintenance Allowance, and later promoted as the Historic Houses Business Relief. The latter framing reflected the policy's focus on relief for houses open to the public, and the HHA's focus on securing relief for this category of houses: i.e., houses that could be defended and promoted for their economic contribution in addition to their historic importance. The Duke of Grafton described the scheme as 'masterminded' by William Proby.[95] The HHA secured meetings with the Arts Minister, Alan Howarth, and the Inland Revenue, with whom they discussed their proposal before submitting it to the Chancellor.[96] Following attempts to convince the government of the case for the new relief over several months, James Hervey-Bathurst, Chairman of the Political and Taxation Committee, informed HHA members that it 'did not find favour' with the Treasury at the close of 1999.[97] The Treasury were afraid that the relief would blur the distinction between what was classified as trading and what was not, encouraging similar claims from non-traders who faced comparable problems.[98] Instead, the HHA began to explore the idea that the £5 million annual tax foregone as a result of OEE could be made available to historic houses via English Heritage grants.[99] However, an additional grant allocation was a far less secure provision for historic houses than a targeted tax relief, as—unlike a relief—it would be easy for future governments to remove.

Securing government approval for ring-fenced English Heritage grants for historic houses was not an easy task, although the HHA had an ally in Jocelyn Stevens, English Heritage's

[94] *Historic House*, winter 1998, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.
[95] *Historic House*, spring 1999, p. 9.
[96] Ibid., p. 23.
[97] *Historic House*, winter 1998, p. 9.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

Chairman, until he retired from the post in 2000. Stevens was a controversial choice as Chairman when appointed in 1992. His reputation as a brutal boss, unafraid to disrupt institutions, led Marcus Binney to describe him as 'fire-breathing'.[100] He had come from money (although not nobility) and attended Eton College, and was a close friend of Princess Margaret in his youth. This background may have explained his lack of hostility towards private country house owners in contrast to many of his colleagues at English Heritage.[101] Stevens consistently supported the HHA's calls for further concessions to support maintenance of privately owned historic houses, agreeing both that supporting private houses in this way was desirable and that the existing funding for heritage could not support it. Upon his retirement, Lord Leicester described him as having recognised 'the importance and real needs of the private owners of Britain's historic houses', despite this being 'not always a popular perception within Government—or even his own department'.[102] Although private owners became technically eligible for Heritage Lottery funding in March 1998, the Fund was still not accepting individual owners' applications at the end of that year.[103] Sympathetic to this hostile funding environment, English Heritage began to offer fixed-rate grants of half of eligible costs to private owners requiring 'high-level works such as roofs, parapets and valley gutters' under Stevens at the close of 1998.[104] The majority of these were available without a means test, which represented a significant achievement for the HHA, who had lobbied for the removal of means tests.[105] Smaller country houses became one of the four priority targets for English Heritage grants in 2000 and, for the first time, parks and gardens were explicitly deemed worthwhile targets for funding.[106]

The government was reluctant to increase English Heritage's funding allocation to ensure that the body was able to deal with the majority of historic house owners' struggles with repair and maintenance itself. Historic houses were not a government priority within an increasingly

[100] 'Wake-up call from the history man', *Times* (3 Apr. 2000), p. 12.
[101] 'Obituary: Sir Jocelyn Stevens', *Times* (14 Oct. 2014), pp. 55–6.
[102] *Historic House*, spring 2000, p. 6.
[103] *Historic House*, spring 1999, p. 12.
[104] Ibid., p. 11.
[105] Ibid.
[106] *Historic House*, summer 2000, Historic Houses Archives, p. 5.

broad view of the 'historic environment sector', but English Heritage's leadership ensured that they remained a priority for one of the state's primary means of funding that sector. In this way, a key body within the state's arm's-length heritage apparatus was committed to working in contravention to the priorities of the government.

Motivated by the beginning of a new millennium and the appointment of a new Chairman of English Heritage, the civil service initiated a review of government's approach to heritage. Stevens' successor in 2000, Neil Cossons, was thoroughly versed in the world of heritage as a serial museum director and industrial archaeologist. Cossons left his post as Director of the Science Museum to take up what many considered 'the most important job in the [English] heritage world' and embarked upon a review of policies related to the historic environment in England.[107] The review was commissioned jointly by DCMS and the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). As Kate Clark has argued, this joint commission indicated the broader relevance of heritage and the historic environment to wider economic and environmental policy agendas.[108] This broader relevance had been acknowledged by previous governments, as discussed in earlier chapters. However, the new review was notable for being underpinned by an understanding of 'heritage' as one facet of the 'historic environment', a term that connects built heritage with its environments and includes 'all surviving physical remains of past human activity'.[109] 'Heritage' had been an especially loaded term since the mid-1980s, but it had not ceased to be employed liberally by governments during the early 1990s (for example, in the naming of the Department of National Heritage). This shift in terminology indicated a new approach to policy affecting historic buildings. The HHA were well-represented in a review that was ambitious in its scope, including 'representatives from faith groups, black heritage networks, museums, natural heritage, design, property interests, disability advocates,

[107] 'Wake-up call from the history man'.
[108] K. Clark, 'Power of Place – Heritage Policy at the Start of the New Millennium', *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, 10/3–4 (2019), p. 257.
[109] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'National Planning Policy Framework' (Feb. 2019), https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20210708211349/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2 (2 May 2022), p. 67.

community groups, rural and urban planning, tourism and visitor attractions as well as academic and professional disciplines such as archaeology and architecture'.[110] The five working groups included both Norman Hudson, a long-time adviser to the HHA, and James Harvey-Bathurst, Chairman of the HHA's Political and Taxation Committee. Lord Leicester (HHA President) was one of twenty-one steering group members, and the HHA's evidence featured in the report extensively.[111]

The resultant review paper, published in December 2000, was entitled *Power of Place*. One of its key components was a poll designed to gauge the public's attitudes towards heritage and its role in society. Lord Montagu described the results of the poll as 'no less than sensational': ninety-eight per cent of participants thought that all schoolchildren should be taught about England's historic environment; eighty-eight per cent thought that heritage created jobs and boosted the economy, and therefore should be supported by public funding; and seventy-six per cent thought that it enriched their own lives.[112] One of the main conclusions of the report was therefore that people believed heritage was socially and economically important and, accordingly, should be supported financially. John Holden has argued that the report highlighted the vast difference between the government's low political valuation of heritage as a social tool, and the public's high opinion of it.[113]

However, the report was criticised for failing to discuss the form that the fiscal incentives and additional grants it recommended might take.[114] An exception to this was a statement of support for the reduction of VAT on listed building repairs, which was an uncontroversial topic within the heritage sector (despite governments ignoring widespread pleas for the reduction since the 1970s). Tellingly, this measure was never adopted, although it had the full support of DCMS Secretary Chris Smith.[115] Smith later reflected that the measure would have needed the full

[110] Clark, 'Power of Place', p. 257.
[111] English Heritage, *Power of Place: The future of the historic environment* (London, 2000), pp. 13; 24.
[112] Hansard, HL Deb 20 December 2000, vol 620, c741.
[113] J. Holden, *Creating cultural value: how culture has become a tool of government policy* (London, 2004); Lennox, *Heritage and Politics in the Public Value Era*, p. 74.
[114] HL Deb 20 December 2000, vol 620, c748.
[115] Smith voiced his support for VAT reductions for listed building repairs at the HHA's 1997 AGM (See: *Historic House*, spring 1998, p. 10).

support of an enthusiastic Chancellor to have any chance of being enacted.[116] The same could be said of any financial measures that DCMS and its quangos, including English Heritage, might suggest; they required the support of a Chancellor to counter objections from the Inland Revenue and Treasury. Although the interests of custodians of historic buildings were well represented in the report, it lacked clear directives on the best way forward for financial support of built heritage. There were few specific suggestions that an enthusiastic Chancellor might take forward. Presumably, this was because engaging with the complex work of making practical policy suggestions was unfeasible for a group that was attempting to set a new agenda for the entire historic environment sector. Many of their recommendations were vague statements such as 'back people who make things happen' and 'carry out routine maintenance and regular condition surveys'.[117]

The government's response paper, published by DCMS and DETR and entitled *A Force for Our Future* (December 2001), expressed 'a need to find new ways of reaching and empowering excluded individuals and communities' through the historic environment.[118] Demonstrating their relevance to this policy focus on empowerment at a local level would be essential for privately owned country houses to justify funding and government support going into the new millennium. Although the paper set out an ambitious agenda for heritage protection, and was described as 'the first statement of Government policy on heritage for a generation' by a DCMS minister, it did not represent a political achievement for privately owned built heritage.[119] The paper's ambition was not necessarily beneficial to this section of the historic environment; its recommendations related to access—most notably, the suggestion that children should be allowed free admission to all sites of historical and cultural importance (as well as to museums)[120]— were expensive, although cross-party politically attractive, and threatened to overshadow the detailed problems of funding for those sites.

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[116] Chris Smith, in conversation with the author on 17 September 2020.
[117] English Heritage, *Power of Place*, pp. 47-48.
[118] Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, *The historic environment: a force for our future* (London, 2001), p. 4.
[119] Hansard, HC Deb 7 Mar 2002, vol 381, c133.
[120] DCMS and DTLGR, *The historic environment: a force for our future*, p. 20.

The 25th Anniversary of the Historic Houses Association

Despite the HHA's declarations of a new crisis, little had changed for privately owned historic houses in the first few years of the New Labour government. In his departing speech as HHA President at the 1998 AGM, William Proby expressed his regret that the Association had not made better progress in securing more favourable policy arrangements over the previous five years. He delivered a bleak assessment of the future, as he stated that historic houses were 'still in the era of crisis management'. Proby appears to have felt that a perennial problem faced by the HHA had become more acute in recent years, as he further complained that they suffered 'from the inability of some politicians to distinguish between house and owner, and the reluctance to do anything that might help the house because it could help the owner'.[121] A year later, Proby's successor as President, the Earl of Leicester, stated that one of the HHA's main challenges would be 'to convince the Government and others that we are still, as Chris Smith [the then Culture Secretary] said [at the 1997 AGM], "a good thing"'.[122] Martin Drury, Director General of the NT, reiterated Proby's message during the 1999 AGM when he stressed the importance of joint action 'to remind the government that the long history of heritage preservation in this country is one of enlightened partnership between the state and the private owner; a partnership which is the envy of other countries'.[123] Drury told HHA members that the NT believed 'more fervently than ever before, that the nation will be best served by a government policy and a fiscal regime that encourages the private owner to continue to look after, invest in and open historic houses to the public'.[124] The belief that the government needed to be convinced of the desirability of maintaining historic houses in private ownership—which had been accepted as fundamental policy since the fiscal changes of the mid-1970s—reveals how far the relationship between government and the HHA had deteriorated during the 1990s.

[121] *Historic House*, spring 1999, p. 12.
[122] *Historic House*, spring 2000, p. 7.
[123] Ibid. p. 11.
[124] Ibid.

Although the HHA felt they were unable to make political progress, the situation of privately owned country houses had been transformed since 1950. The idea that these houses were 'still in the era of crisis management' was an obvious exaggeration, but one that suited the HHA's political agenda far more than emphasising that the financial situations of the vast majority of historic house owners had improved considerably within a generation. A lack of political progress in the 1990s was far less significant than it would have been in the 1960s or 1970s, as the policy framework that had been established by 1976 enabled the majority of historic house owners to stay afloat. To both the casual observer and the government, country house owners appeared to be relatively secure. In 2000, Montagu described the 'saving of our historic houses' as 'one of the great success stories in the history of conservation';[125] he believed that the major political challenges had been overcome. Individual country houses faced financial challenges, but the era of constant historic house destruction was firmly in the past.

The HHA's twenty-fifth anniversary projects, in 1998, better reflected the reality of the country house's political and economic situation, as they celebrated how much had been achieved since 1973. The HHA commissioned John Cornforth to produce a study of the recent history of England's country houses. Cornforth had authored the 1974 report *Country Houses in Britain: Can they Survive?,* which was the inspiration for the V&A's *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition.[126] Proby described Cornforth as 'uniquely equipped to consider changing attitudes in both the public and private sector' because of his long involvement with *Country Life* as an architectural writer; with the National Trust, as a member of its Historic Buildings Committee; and membership of the Historic Buildings Council for England from 1971 to 1985.[127] Although cautioning against the effects of the 1998 budget, Cornforth gave an optimistic account of the current financial outlook of country houses as a collective. He wrote that 'almost all the owners [he] talked to were more optimistic than [he] expected them to be', noting the contrast with 'the dire conditions in 1948 or 1974'.[128] The only house among those he considered 'the most

[125] HL Deb 20 December 2000, vol 620, c741.
[126] J. Cornforth, *The Country Houses of England, 1948–1998* (London, 1998), p. 5.
[127] Ibid., p. xiii.
[128] Ibid., p. 4.

important' that had been 'lost' in the past twenty-five years was Mentmore, and only Kedleston Hall and Warwick Castle had left private ownership.[129] According to Cornforth's account, the 'new confidence and optimism' that owners had gained as a result of Conservative tax changes had not been altered by the election results of May 1997.[130] However, he warned:

> [The government's] strongly populist approach to all the arts and the heritage, with a greater and probably simplistic approach to access, may well upset balances carefully built up over many years. That emphasis is likely to influence conditions attached to repair grants, exemptions as well as in lieu and *in situ* deals; and could lead to seriously damaging sales of contents as well as owners' decisions to sell up completely.[131]

In this, Cornforth echoed the HHA's argument that changing the conditions for conditional exemption may destroy a system of preservation that was more delicate than it appeared. He also anticipated the government's emphasis on access in the 2001 report *A Force for Our Future*.

An accompanying exhibition at London's Tate Gallery revealed an even more optimistic outlook from the HHA. It opened in 1998 to coincide with the publication of Cornforth's book, and was entitled *In Celebration – the Art of the Country House*. It had a similar purpose to the 1985 *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition, albeit on a much smaller scale: only two rooms, and ninety-three objects.[132] The exhibition brought together a wide array of artworks to demonstrate the contribution made by country houses to national culture and to 'celebrate the survival of the privately owned house'.[133] The HHA were the main organisers, and William Proby's preface presented optimism about the future of country houses:

> The survival of country houses is in part a tribute to the resourcefulness of individual owners who have been able to adapt in a remarkable way to the greatly changed social and economic circumstances of the late twentieth century, but it also reflects a supportive attitude from government and the public generally, as millions of people over the past twenty-five years have been able to visit and enjoy historic houses and their settings. Despite this positive story, the survival of the privately owned house is still delicately balanced and the properties for which owners are responsible are fragile as ever. They will require continued support if they are to survive into the next century.

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[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid., p. 9.
[131] Ibid., p. 9.
[132] K. Hearn, R. Upstone, and G. Waterfield, *In Celebration: The Art of the Country House* (London, 1998).
[133] Ibid., p. 8.

The statement that country houses would require 'constant support' was hardly combative phrasing. Proby intimated that the policy framework for preserving country houses was essentially sound and acknowledged that the government had adopted a 'supportive attitude'.

Press coverage of *In Celebration* was generally positive, albeit unenthusiastic.[134] A critic for the *Times* described the show as 'unusual and intriguing', whilst bemoaning the lack of evidence of more recent collecting that would demonstrate that the houses were 'living things'.[135] Nevertheless, there was no shortage of twentieth-century art included in the exhibition, although the majority of items on display had been collected before the mid-nineteenth century. As another critic, the architectural historian Giles Worsley, put it, there were still 'a vast number of leaking roofs to be put right before owners can commit themselves wholeheartedly to collecting'.[136] Comparing the tone of the *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition with *In Celebration*, Worsley claimed that:

> … there is a telling comparison to be made between the triumphalist tenor of the Washington exhibition, put on at the height of the Thatcherite boom and the peak of country-house mania that accompanied it, and the more sober picture today. The latter attitude is undoubtedly more realistic and encouraging.[137]

This assessment of the attitude supposedly communicated in the Tate exhibition perhaps reveals more about Worsley's view of how the country house ought to be (tastefully) represented than it does about the situation of country houses. For Worsley, the Washington exhibition was a crude attempt to demonstrate relevance by pandering to the passing 'country-house mania' of the 1980s. To him, the more modest scale of the Tate exhibition indicated cautious confidence among house owners. However, it may also have indicated a lack of public appetite in Britain for anything comparable to the show mounted in Washington; visitor numbers to historic houses were (as previously mentioned) in decline at the end of the 1990s.

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[134] For example, 'Tate raids stately homes to put treasures on show', *Times* (12 Jun. 1998), p. 4; 'The Big Show: In Celebration – the Art of the Country House', *Times* (14 Nov. 1998), p. 42.
[135] 'Private view', *Independent* (7 Nov. 1998), p. 15.
[136] 'Portrait of a confidently leaking roof', *Times Literary Supplement* (18 Dec. 1998), p. 18.
[137] Ibid.

Another exhibition of a similar scale, at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in May–August 1999, swiftly followed the Tate's offering. The exhibition was entitled *In the Public Eye: treasures from collections in the East of England* and had a clearer political agenda: the 130 objects on show had all been exempted from capital taxes and were on loan from local historic houses. In the exhibition catalogue, Leicester (HHA President) wrote that the exhibition demonstrated the importance of the 'more minor objects which give many British collections their peculiar charm and depth'. The exhibition was a platform for the HHA's views on the new conditional exemption arrangements: 'It would be a great loss', wrote Leicester, 'if the new requirement for exemption, which is that the objects should be pre-eminent, meant that these minor objects were no longer retained in the United Kingdom'.[138] Upon visiting the exhibition, Arts Minister Alan Howarth seized upon the format as an ideal way to increase access to exempted objects and ensure that owners satisfy their legal obligations. The financial website 'This is Money' reported that Mr Howarth had 'vowed to write to museums bosses to encourage them to mount similar shows' in other regions.[139] This was not quite the desired result of the show, as redirecting the burden of stricter access controls to museums—and encouraging regular movement of fragile artworks—failed to solve the practical problems raised by the proposed requirement that houses containing conditionally exempt artworks must be open for a minimum of twenty-five days annually. In this instance, the government had agreed to indemnify all the works on show, so the Fitzwilliam did not have to find the funds for an enormous insurance bill.[140] However, this would need to continue for all future exhibitions of conditionally exempt artworks if such events were to become a long-term solution to the problem of access. Moreover, the exhibition had been supported by Sotheby's; the auction house's director, James Jowitt, warned that 'exhibitions like this are not viable every year and not everything can be displayed in this way'. Jowitt also commented that there was no way to lessen the effects of the tightening of the

[138] D. Robinson and H. Wyndham, *In the public eye: treasures from collections in the east of England: 18th May-1st August 1999, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 1.
[139] "Tax break' pictures go on show', *This is Money* (7 Jul. 1999), https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/news/article-1579742/Tax-break-pictures-go-on-show.html (1 May 2022).
[140] Ibid.

status rules to 'pre-eminent' quality, even if a partial solution to public access could be found in exhibitions.[141]

The show was dismissed by the left-leaning press as a public relations stunt for the HHA. However, it was not a very successful stunt. Mark Thomas told the *Telegraph* that the exhibition was 'an attempt to soften government regulations on displaying tax-exempt art', and rejected the argument that changes to conditional exemption could lead to many artworks leaving the country, because if 'they don't let people see it now, it doesn't make any difference if it is sold abroad'.[142] A *Guardian* reporter, George Monbiot, dismissed the show as 'a fatuous nonsense', being an 'unthemed and essentially meaningless' assemblage of objects intended to defend 'one of the most pernicious scams ever overseen by an elected government'.[143] In this account, the public money spent on indemnifying the artworks exhibited represented the reneging of the Chancellor's promise that the conditional exemption scheme would not involve any additional spending by DCMS. To Monbiot, the exhibition appeared to 'represent an attempt by a Labour government to sustain the social exclusion it claims it is determined to fight'.[144] By contrast, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported that the 'irreparable harm to the heritage' caused by the 1998 Finance Act was 'admirably exposed' by *In the Public Eye*.[145] Neither view appears to have swayed the government from their commitment to maintaining conditional exemption with reformed conditions. In November 1999, the culture spokesman in the House of Lords, Lord McIntosh of Haringey, dismissed arguments that the tightening of these conditions amounted to retrospective legislation and said that if individuals wanted to 'preserve their right to maintain those chattels without showing them to the public, they have a very simple solution: they can pay the tax'. He did 'not believe that there is any obligation on the Government—either moral or legal—to

[141] 'Chattels rules may backfire', *Antiques Trade Gazette* (12 Jul. 1999), https://www.antiquestradegazette.com/news/1999/chattels-rules-may-backfire/ (5 Apr. 2021).
[142] 'Comedian mocks tax-free art show', *Independent* (8 Jul. 1992), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/comedian-mocks-tax-free-art-show-1104976.html (7 May 2021); 'Art of tax avoidance fails to silence critics', *Independent* (7 Jul. 1999), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/art-of-tax-avoidance-fails-to-silence-critics-1104916.html (8 May 2021).
[143] 'Arts of deception', *Guardian* (31 Jul. 1999), p. G7.
[144] Ibid.
[145] 'Asses on the rampage', *Sunday Telegraph* (25 Jul. 1999), p. 10.

contribute to security or legal costs'.[146] The government's stance remained consistent and inflexible: if owners of significant historic art objects wanted to avoid taxation, they must accept the costs of display and security.

Slow political progress in the new millennium

Several years later, the 'reluctance to do anything to help the house because it might help the owner' of which William Proby had complained in 1998 appeared to have abated among some Labour ministers, when the unresolved issue of historic houses' unsustainable annual repair bills returned to public attention. In 2002, Baroness Blackstone, the Heritage Minister, and Tessa Jowell, DCMS Secretary, began to call for the government to allow historic house owners to claim repair bills against tax.[147] Blackstone's support for tax relief was a result of the HHA's lobbying efforts; after a meeting at Eastnor Castle in October 2001 she 'understood the concerns of the HHA and in particular appreciated the importance that they attached to fiscal relief for maintenance'.[148] The scheme for which Blackstone was advocating more than a year later would enable grades I–II* properties to offset maintenance bills up to £40,000 annually. This was estimated to cost the Treasury £5–£10 million a year, in exchange for a minimum of 28 days' access to the participating houses. The *Times* called Blackstone's and Jowell's support 'remarkable because the issue was considered a political hot potato even during Conservative rule'.[149] However, they quoted Blackstone explaining that she was convinced of the efficiency of this tax break because the upkeep of rural attractions 'could lead the Government's efforts for rural regeneration' and increase the £13.8 billion a year already spent by tourists in the countryside. Blackstone wanted the government to encourage more Public-Private

[146] Hansard, HL Deb 9 Nov 1999, vol 606, c1249.
[147] 'Culture clash as stately homes seek £10m tax break', *Times* (18 Nov. 2002), p. 3.
[148] Letter from R. Wilkin to Lord Leicester, 24 Oct. 2001, Historic Houses Archives.
[149] 'Culture clash as stately homes seek £10m tax break'.

Partnerships.[150] The HHA had successfully connected their maintenance relief scheme with wider government policy priorities.

However, support from DCMS ministers was not sufficient to secure the concession. In August 2003, the Treasury informed the HHA that they had 'not so far even reached first base in delivering a business case which would allow Treasury officials to recommend [an Historic Properties Maintenance Relief (HPMR)] formally to Ministers'.[151] DCMS officials had advocated for the HHA's rebranded policy recommendation for tax relief on historic buildings' maintenance costs, but had 'been criticised by irritated Treasury officials' for failing to provide 'compelling and technically competent economic supporting evidence'. The economic justification for the relief was all the more important because HPMR 'also had to overcome the prejudices of 'cash for toffs' that still certainly existed', among DCMS and Treasury officials as well as among government ministers.[152]

While the Cabinet and Treasury still required convincing that tax-free maintenance schemes could save or generate money, DCMS' quangos were ready to provide large sums to 'save' threatened houses. The NHMF contributed £17,425,000 towards the NT's purchase of Tyntesfield, a Victorian Gothic Revival house in North Somerset, in May 2002. The full cost of the house was £25 million, and it was up for sale after the owner, Lord Wraxall, died before naming an heir to the estate. The NT's decision to purchase the house was influenced by the opinion of Mark Girouard, the foremost historian of Victorian country houses, who claimed that there was 'no other Victorian country house which so richly represents its age as Tyntesfield'.[153] Such a purchase was, at this point in its history, an exceptional event for the NT: it had not acquired a country house since Chastleton House, Oxfordshire, in 1991.[154] Martin Drury had stated in 1999 that the NT had 'no desire to acquire any more country houses'.[155] However, this

[150] Ibid.
[151] Letter from R. Wilkin to J. Hervey-Bathurst, 21 Aug. 2003, Historic Houses Archives.
[152] Ibid.
[153] 'Trust 'hopeful' of buying historic mansion', *BBC News* (14 Jun. 2002), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2045513.stm (8 Apr. 2022).
[154] 'Rescue of Jacobean gem will cost £10m', *Daily Telegraph* (11 Nov. 1991), p. 7.
[155] *Historic House*, spring 2000, p. 11.

exception was clearly a widely supported decision. The NHMF not only exhausted its annual funds allocation, but liquidated a significant amount of its core endowment fund in order to support Tyntesfield's purchase.[156] The NT was able to raise £1.5 million in only fifty days via donations from their members, demonstrating considerable public concern for the fate of a Victorian country house.[157] While the NHMF acted swiftly to intervene against the potential dispersal of Tyntesfield's contents, the government remained unwilling to sacrifice c.£10 million in annual tax revenue to prevent sales of a similar sale caused by unmanageable repair and maintenance costs. After decades of trying, the HHA, NT, and NHMF were still unable to convince government to introduce further tax concessions that would prevent these 'crisis' situations.

* * *

At the turn of the millennium, the privately owned country house appeared to be secure. Financially, it was supported by entrenched political concessions. Socially, it had weathered fluctuations in cultural status and retained its importance for national tourism and history. Most significantly, its fate was no longer tied to that of the aristocracy. As the lack of the HHA's (or any heritage organisation's) involvement in the hunting and Lords reform debates demonstrated, the preservation of country houses had become a stand-alone issue. These were no longer aristocratic houses, but historic houses.

Despite complaining of New Labour's disdain for the past and general hostility towards inherited wealth, the HHA knew that the removal of their hard-won concessions was almost unthinkable by 2000. Cross-party political support was well and truly established, and New Labour understood the economic and diplomatic value of the cultural symbols and themes associated with 'traditional' Britain, even if they were unwilling to highlight them in their

[156] *Parl Pap.* (2003/04), HC 747, National Heritage Memorial Fund: Annual Report and Accounts 2003–2004, p. 17.
[157] 'Trust wins fight to save Tyntesfield for the nation', *Times* (19 Jun. 2002), p. 9.

speeches. However, the HHA also understood their place in the newly conceptualised historic environment sector. They were realistic and strategic in their political expectations, and only asked for concessions that were demonstrably beneficial for the wider public and economy. Country houses were no longer the very core of the national heritage industry that they had shaped and cultivated, but they remained indispensable to it.

Conclusion

The history of the privately owned country house's political and cultural status after 1950 cannot be told in isolation. It is a product of multifaceted cultural shifts that took place over several decades; of individual decisions taken as a result of personal and political relationships; and, more than anything else, of political expediency. This study has departed from previous histories in attempting to delineate the interactions between these various threads of the history of built heritage preservation, country houses, and the landed aristocracy in twentieth-century Britain. It has shown that broad-based political support for public subsidy of privately owned country houses developed *after* the key legislation which secured that public subsidy was enacted. In doing so, it has emphasised the significance of the support for private ownership that developed within and between the heritage sector's political networks and the civil service. Further, it has shown that the value placed on country houses and their contents by international collectors, visitors, and viewers strengthened privately owned country houses both financially and politically.

When Stafford Cripps commissioned the Gowers Report in 1948, he gave political weight to the views of the growing, but nevertheless small, group of professional aesthetes who championed the country house's architecture, contents, and estate as 'the quintessence of the English ideal'.[1] The very terms of the Commission, to determine 'what general arrangements might be made by the Government for the preservation, maintenance and use of houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest which might otherwise not be preserved, including, where desirable, the preservation of a house and its contents as a unity', all but guaranteed that the Gowers Committee would decide upon ambitious and expensive preservation measures. The 'non-partisan' Committee members deferred to the expertise of the most passionate defenders of privately owned country house entities and formalised their views in policy recommendations.

[1] This is Roy Strong's phrasing, describing the presentation of country houses in *Country Life* after 1918; see R. Strong, *Country Life 1897-1997: The English Arcadia* (London, 1996), p. 108.

Although the Gowers Committee's full vision of the state-supported privately owned country house was not accepted by either Attlee's government or Churchill's 1951–55 government, it had long-lasting implications for preservation policy. The Report established the terms of debate for country house preservation legislation for the remainder of the century: there was never a question of whether to preserve country houses; the question was only how it should be done. The ambition of the Gowers proposals made the adoption of only one element of their suggestions in 1953, the Historic Buildings Councils (HBCs), appear an austere attempt at addressing the problem of preservation.

The lack of policy change during the remainder of the 1950s and the 1960s reflects a lack of interest in revisiting built heritage preservation after the establishment of the HBCs and a lack of political ambition among country house owners. This period in which the stately home industry blossomed, and the Historic Houses Association (HHA) developed as the equivalent of a trade union for country house owners who opened to the public, was crucial in establishing the country house as a viable entity for state support. In the mid-1970s, the stately home industry was financially weak enough to make politically oriented organisation essential, but strong enough to mount a campaign to protest against the threat of a wealth tax (with ample help from other arts and heritage organisations). A small group of country house owners were in an unusually privileged position to develop a special-interest lobby, as they could dedicate a huge proportion of their time to the new association.

When the message of the *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition in 1974 is compared to the public statements of the newly formed HHA, the latter's concentration on tourism is conspicuous. The V&A exhibition's great success was in the mobilisation of an apparently neutral, respected institution (the Museum) to present a political opinion that was held by a minority. The exhibition represented the Gowers Committee's suggestions afresh, effectively making the provision of wide-ranging tax exemptions appear to be an uncontroversial issue. It depicted country houses as family homes and positioned ancestral owners as the future of country house preservation. The HHA benefited from this without being seen to engineer it. The exhibition did not make Wilson's government seriously consider supporting privately owned

country houses financially as homes primarily, regardless of public access to them or their contemporary utility as tourist attractions, farms, or other small businesses. However, it (and the petition against the wealth tax) did make the 1975/6 conditional exemption and maintenance fund arrangements appear less generous, because of the public access conditions attached to them.

The extension of exemptions for heritage properties that were present under estate duty to cover houses, gardens, and amenity land in 1975/6 was intended to be a temporary measure. As detailed in Chapter Three, the Select Committee on the Wealth Tax were tasked with determining how Capital Transfer Tax (CTT) could be workable for heritage properties. Because that Select Committee decided that a wealth tax was unfeasible, and they had never been tasked with determining how heritage exemptions would work under CTT, the attempt to find a permanent solution was abandoned. The temporary solution therefore became permanent, and politicians did not have to justify a system that was already in place.

The government policy line that 'it has been the view of successive governments that the best way of securing the preservation of historic houses in this country is to encourage private owners to continue to occupy and maintain them, making arrangements for public access wherever possible' was not articulated until 1977. This statement has been repeated by Secretaries of State ever since, with the notable exceptions of Michael Heseltine and Nicholas Ridley under Thatcher. In 1977, it was voiced by the Department of the Environment in defence of the government's decision not to buy Mentmore Towers, which was being abandoned as a family home. In order to avoid a greater political challenge—the idea that the state ought to step in and save country house ensembles when their owners were no longer willing to take care of them—the recently, and almost accidentally, enacted measures to help private country house owners were represented as the result of a long-held cross-party policy line. The Mentmore 'crisis' therefore crystallised this general policy of supporting private owners as something that would be accepted and carried forward by both Conservative and Labour governments. Indeed, the Mentmore sale generated a major reorganisation of the government's response to 'threatened' country houses—a category that now included houses that were simply put up for sale. For this

reason, the Mentmore sale is a milestone in the political importance of the country house ensemble.

The establishment of the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) in 1980 is the most significant consequence of the sale. The Fund has been used to acquire numerous country houses and their collections for the National Trust (NT); to set up charitable trusts; and to purchase significant fragments of collections from country houses. Many of these collections remain on display, which was made possible by a provision in the 1980 Finance Act that enabled art objects accepted in lieu of tax to remain *in situ*. Powderham Castle, Althorp, Castle Howard, Highclere, Belvoir Castle, Mount Stuart, and Sudeley Castle have all benefited from this measure since 1980.

The funding available through the NHMF, and the frequency with which it went to country houses in the 1980s and 1990s particularly, was an enormous change for the heritage funding landscape. Crucially, the NHMF's establishment was an important component of the gradual removal of arts and heritage funding decisions away from cabinet ministers (the expansion of the 'arm's-length principle') that escalated in the 1980s; as a fund that has remained independent from departmental budgets, it has largely bypassed politicians' agendas.

Bypassing politicians' agendas is a theme of country house preservation under Thatcher, Major, and Blair. The established importance of country houses to British tourism by the 1980s, and the NT's ever-increasing reluctance to admit more country houses to its maintenance repertoire, made supporting private ownership an inescapably sensible political decision. Thatcher's cabinet ministers may have attempted to distance themselves from aristocrats and inherited wealth in their rhetoric, but they approved significant improvements to heritage maintenance funds—among other seemingly small policy changes—because the policy line of supporting private ownership was both established and financially beneficial.

More significant than any policy changes in this period were the cultural shifts that reinforced the economic and cultural value of Britain's country house collections. The *Treasure Houses of Britain* exhibition in 1985 demonstrated to British politicians that country houses were viewed as invaluable assets internationally. By this time, the booming art market was already providing owners who were lucky enough to have inherited an extensive art collection with funds

for repair programmes, maintenance funds, or charitable trusts that would secure better tax conditions for themselves and future generations. The fiscal apparatus was already in place for owners to make the most of the high prices that their possessions fetched on the open market.

Major's government had no interest in improving what they believed was already a privileged fiscal system protecting privately owned country houses. However, this mattered very little in the 1990s, as country house owners enjoyed an extension of the beneficial financial climate of the previous decade. Claims of another period of crisis for country houses were, rightly, viewed as overblown by politicians and critics. Country houses were required to jostle for resources in the increasingly crowded heritage sector, but this was because they were considered 'secure' rather than unimportant. Even Blair's first government, which the HHA quickly branded as the ultimate political assailant of the privately owned country house, did not interfere with the existing legislative and funding provisions for country houses significantly.

A detailed understanding of how the HHA operated after it was formed in 1973 is crucial to understanding policy change in relation to country houses. In particular, one of the HHA's greatest early achievements was its collaborative relationship with the NT and National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in the 1970s and 1980s. The dynamic between the Trusts and the HHA was relatively balanced in terms of expertise and political weight before the 1970s, when the Trusts became significantly larger organisations. The NT's and NTS' eagerness to support the HHA's tax agenda made the organisations frequent collaborators, which—as the Trusts became increasingly important vehicles for the government's involvement in historic preservation—undoubtedly lent additional legitimacy to the HHA as an organisation that represented the interests of the heritage sector as a whole. This relationship was crucial during the wealth tax campaigns of the mid-1970s.

The role of civil servants who had been lobbied by the HHA for years (or, in some cases, decades) in shaping policy changes has been overlooked, but they were crucial. It is telling that the early HHA executive members reject the description of the HHA as a lobbying organisation; they viewed their relationship with the Treasury and the Inland Revenue as more collaborative: the HHA saw themselves as respected advisors, and the civil servants they spoke with understood

their position. The Treasury and Inland Revenue determined the shape of the policy changes that politicians ultimately authorised, and—having witnessed the expensive 'emergency' purchases of heritage property of a series of governments—they were consistently supportive of targeted tax exemptions.

Previous histories of this topic have not shown how the Historic Houses Committee within the British Tourist Authority laid the groundwork for the HHA, which was essentially the same Committee enlarged and made independent. There was already political direction within the developing country house lobby in the late 1960s, but it was almost entirely focused on opening conditions for country houses: tax exemptions seemed out of reach. As mentioned above, this emphasis on tourism was—and continued to be—the HHA's great strength.

The history of the aristocratic country house owner in this period is nearly indistinguishable from that of the HHA: of the initial utilisation of social connections, which was then eclipsed by rapid professionalisation within a growing heritage sector. By the 1990s, the relevance of country house owners was not in their capacity as aristocrats, if indeed they were aristocrats, but in their willingness and ability to act as guardians of heritage properties and local employers. Their role was no longer only to generate enough funds to maintain an historic property, but also to generate wider economic value as contributors to their local economy and the national tourism industry. The country house no longer depended on the aristocracy to survive; it depended much more on business acumen, charity, and government grants. In this way, it is difficult to argue that the aristocracy as a social category has found new relevance: some aristocrats have carved out a new role for themselves, but—in this context—it is tied to their individual decision to run a country house and not to their title.

The influence of public opinion on policy changes is the most difficult aspect of this history to disentangle. Since the 1980s, the attitudes of both the public and successive governments towards privately owned country houses and their collections is encapsulated in the sporadic revisitation of the same issues, followed by the same lack of sustained interest in addressing them. Interestingly, it is the provisions that have been in place longest that have proved most controversial in the past thirty years. On 28 January 2022, the *Guardian* published an

opinion piece bemoaning the 'overwhelming difficulty' of accessing objects exempted from tax under the conditional exemption scheme for significant artworks, which it described as a 'rarely publicised tax scheme'.[2] The scheme is the oldest of the special exemptions for heritage property, having been introduced in 1896. In 2013, the same newspaper reported that Helen Goodman, Labour's shadow DCMS minister, had described conditional exemption as 'a bit of a racket, really'.[3] Yet, conditional exemption has not been altered since 1998. Then, the result of Mark Thomas' public complaints, and a *Guardian* campaign against conditional exemption, was merely the condition that those entering new conditional exemption arrangements with the Inland Revenue would not be permitted to provide access by prior appointment alone.

There is truth in the argument that increasing public interest in Britain's country houses motivated political efforts to safeguard those houses in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is impossible to isolate that public interest from the success of the stately home industry, which gave private owners greater importance politically as leaders within British tourism and therefore created the conditions under which country houses could be protected as privately owned public assets. However, this thesis has explained the complexities behind the policy making process. False starts, compromises, and moments of exploited opportunity produced the policy measures that support country houses in private ownership today.

[2] 'Inside Britain's least-known art collection are works that should be ours to enjoy', *Guardian* (28 Jan. 2022), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/28/britains-art-collection-works-tax-owners (3 May 2022).
[3] 'Tax exemption for public access to treasured artworks is 'a racket'', *Guardian* (27 Dec. 2013), https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/dec/27/tax-exemption-public-access-treasured-artworks-racket (3 May 2022).

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