Historic Environment Scotland Bill

Caroline Wickham-Jones, Archaeologist: Personal issues and concerns.

- **Partiality.** The HES Bill seeks to establish a new body through the merger of RCAHMS and Historic Scotland. In essence this merges an *impartial* body with responsibility for curating information and records relating to the built and archaeological environment with a body with responsibility for the good management of that environment through designation (*thus with an opinion*). RCAHMS has a strong reputation and the loss of the impartial advice that they offer would be a significant loss.

- **Core tasks.** As an archaeologist I would identify certain core tasks that I feel need to be safeguarded into the long term future:
  
  o **Management of ancient monuments through scheduling.** This, I feel, is best kept at a national level rather than regional in order to avoid issues of local resourcing, expertise, specialization and bias.
  
  o **Survey work.** The survey work undertaken by RCAHMS is vital to ensure a thorough knowledge of the resource that we are trying to manage and understand.
  
  o **Archive Storage** – the National Monuments Record and its search engines such as Canmore, Pastmap. This is an important resource, much used by professionals, students, related professions and the public.
  
  o **Finds disposal.** Care needs to be taken that the allocation of excavated material remains impartial and continues to favour the principal that material be housed as near to the original location as possible. This principal has been hard won – we do not want to lose it.
  
  o **Research.** Archaeology cannot be understood through developer funding alone. Historic Scotland have performed a vital task by funding research excavation and it is important to ensure that they continue to do this. This funding is of particular value where sites are threatened by natural processes or individuals (such as householders and farmers) who would not be able to finance intervention.
  
  o **Properties in Care** – management and access. Public access to heritage monuments is vital but cannot be driven by commercial considerations. A subtle shift towards an emphasis on commerce has taken place over the last three decades and this needs to be halted.
  
  o **Properties in Care** – research. Funding of excavation on Properties in Care is vital in order to understand and interpret sites.
  
  o **Dissemination.** This is vital and currently undertaken very successfully to both academics and the public.
  
  o **Liaison** with the Natural Heritage (SNH). The past population of Scotland lived in a close relationship with the natural world. In many ways it does not make sense to divide the curation of the natural resource from that of the cultural resource, though I accept that is how we do it in Britain (unlike for example our Danish neighbours).
Liaison between HS and SNH fluctuates and depends totally on the interests of individual staff. I would like to see attention given to permanent improvement of this matter.

- **World Heritage.** As archaeologists we have much to be proud of and this is the epitome. An active policy regarding World Heritage Sites is vital.

- **Resourcing.** The resources allocated to core areas of heritage protection and understanding have dwindled in recent decades. This needs to be addressed and resources restored to a realistic and significant level. Scotland will continue to punch underweight in the field of heritage unless we are prepared to support the work of the heritage professional. The new body will be toothless unless it has the resources to undertake its role.

- **Regional vv Central.** It is essential that we maintain a body to provide a national overview of the Scottish Resource. At the same time, that body can only operate effectively if it maintains close contact with local professionals and community bodies. In the past two decades much of this contact and understanding has been cut and HS staff have been forced to operate as faceless bureaucrats. This needs to be addressed.

- **Innovation.** HS and RCAHMS lead the way in many significant aspects of the heritage profession. It is vital that the new body maintains the flexibility and resourcing to continue this role. In many ways we have begun to lag behind our richer neighbor, England, here. It is, for example notable that we know little about the submerged prehistoric landscape around Scotland, though better resourcing in English waters has led to discoveries like the Neanderthal Skulls off East Anglia, the footprints at Happisburgh and various finds of handaxes and other early tools from the English sector of the North Sea. Given the likely economic importance of the Scottish sector of the North Sea in the next decades this specific issue is of particular importance.

**Additional Replies to specific questions raised in the call for evidence:**

1. How will the creation of Historic Environment Scotland help to improve the overall management and promotion of Scotland’s historic environment? Will it help to make Scotland’s historic environment more attractive to communities, families and tourists?

If the bill leads to streamlined and efficient management it will improve management and promotion, but only if current levels of resourcing are improved. The overall functions as set out in section 2 are good. It should be noted that promotion needs to apply internally to staff as much as to the public externally. At the moment many HS staff are ignorant about matters outside their specific role – Conservation and promotion staff at the recent research workshop showed a sad lack of awareness of the archaeological work undertaken by HS for example and were generally ignorant of the importance of submerged landscapes (another field with which HS are concerned).
2. Are the functions proposed for Historic Environment Scotland the correct ones or are there any omissions? Are the outcomes expected of the new body ambitious enough or could they be strengthened?

The functions are good. I am pleased to see dissemination and archiving included.

3. Does the Bill establish a clear and appropriate relationship between Historic Environment Scotland and all other public and private bodies with an interest in Scotland’s historic environment?

This is a diverse and tricky field, so the proof of the Bill will be in its enactment.

4. In what ways will the Bill help you/ your organisation to better manage and promote Scotland’s historic environment?

I wait to see. The deficiencies in management that relate to my work result from lack of funding and the bill does not address resourcing levels as such. See above.

5. Are there any areas of the Bill that you consider could be strengthened or improved?

My concerns are set out above.

6. Do you consider that the Bill’s Policy Memorandum adequately sets out: the Bill’s policy objectives; whether alternative ways of meeting the objectives were considered; the consultation undertaken on the objectives; the Bill’s effects on equal opportunities, human rights, island communities, local government and sustainable development?

It is important to respect the diverse nature of Scotland. The Gaelic heritage for example is relevant to only part of the nation. To establish Gaelic speaking schools or use Gaelic translations in Orkney would be as relevant as using French and less relevant than Norwegian. Care needs to be taken on this issue – note Orkney is provided only as an example; this issue affects many other parts of Scotland.

It is also important to recognise the significance of local heritage – the principal that locally found material cultural remains should be housed within the area where they were found is an important one.

Finally I would note that the past inhabitants of Scotland inhabited the natural world, it is impossible to separate them from that world, and full account of the past environment, including landscape and environmental change needs to be taken into account. This may be done through the relationship with SNH, through academic studies and departments and through other organisations.

7. The Scottish Government’s newly published historic environment strategy
also seeks to improve enjoyment and understanding of Scotland’s historic environment. The Committee does not wish to repeat the extensive consultation undertaken on the strategy, but would welcome your views on whether it and the Bill together:

- establish clearly who is responsible and accountable for delivering the strategy;
- will involve appropriately all those public and private bodies with a role in improving the historic environment;
- lead to demonstrably better access to, and enjoyment and management of, the historic environment.

Digital technology is important and currently the use of digital media is patchy. Too much focus has been spent on highly visual projects such as Scottish Ten which looks glitzy though the overall research impact may be questioned while lower ‘value’ projects of wider impact have been neglected – there is still, for example, no dedicated website for the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site and its associated archaeology despite its general high public profile and potential public interest.

The Committee expects to take oral evidence on the Bill in April and May, and to report to the Parliament in June. It would be helpful if your response could indicate whether you would like to provide oral evidence to the Committee. Please note, however, that there is no guarantee that such a request will be met by the Committee.

I would be happy to provide oral evidence to the Committee if there are questions that I can answer, though I have set out my own concerns here. I would, however, need financial help with my expenses if expected to travel south.

CR Wickham-Jones

Please note: though I am a lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Aberdeen, these comments represent my personal opinion not that of my employers.