

## Editorial

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*Engineering History and Heritage* does not normally tackle international outrage, neither does this edition's editorial author, but an unjust and untimely death in Syria made it too awkward to avoid.

Amid the horrors of the terrorist activity and the imposition of a religious state in the former Roman province is an insidious attack on our collective past. It isn't usual to see the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director-General near to tears on television – heritage doesn't normally provoke such emotional response – but Dr Irina Bokova was palpably shaken in a recent interview. The incident was the destruction by Islamic State militants of the first century temple complex of Baalshamin at Palmyra, set in the World Heritage site dubbed *The Venice in the Sands*. This prompted her to try to find words to express what we no doubt saw written large on such an act of violence. 'The systematic destruction of cultural symbols embodying Syrian cultural diversity reveals the true intent of the such attacks – which is to deprive Syrian people of its knowledge, its identity and history', she wrote.

All around Palmyra, of course, is a tide of human suffering. The destruction of an artefact beside such enormous pain makes for an uncomfortable weighing of values; these are difficult comparisons. So it is perhaps the assassination of Professor Khaled al-Asaad that puts a full perspective on the atrocity. Prof al-Asaad was a man who had dedicated four decades of his life to researching, investigating and maintaining the historic site. He was killed because he had done so well the very work he loved.

Dr Bokova is right. What has happened at Palmyra and many other sites, including Hatra, Nimrud and Khorsabad, was an attack at a far deeper level than a piece of mindless vandalism, some zealots let loose. It reveals an Orwellian desire to obliterate evidence of a past society because the ideology of the present occupiers can neither accept any rivals nor reason with the past. In this sense it is the antithesis of our community, which is a place where we can dwell and be very different, yet share common values.

Professor al-Asaad's death should draw us up short. It is an awkward to step out of that context and into some of the application in an editorial. I will try.

Our international heritage is a shared heritage. What is happening to archaeological ruins in northern Syria is iconoclasm of the most bigoted nature, cheap victories against an unprotected witness to the past that reveal a corruption of spirit. But heritage has often

been at the edge of the sword, either deliberately or as a by-product of human obsession. Ceausescu's grand plan for the boulevards of Bucharest saw the destruction of many individual buildings of significance as well as context and setting. In its day, it led to huge international outcry. He had his grand plans to leave an indelible mark, something to perpetuate his ego, and held of little regard the price in terms of lost history.

In contrast, a mature view of our built heritage is one that shows it to be an anchor to developed civilization. The castles, keeps, ecclesiastical and industrial ruins in our countryside show us where we have come from, so that we can interpret our present living the better. It helps us educate our children and satisfy our craving for roots. Our expanding cities need points of reference and heritage structures provide the echo that makes them liveable: liveable cities need a tangible past.

The very existence of UNESCO, The International Council on Monuments and Sites, English Heritage, Historic Scotland, Cadw, The National Trust and hundreds of other national Heritage Trusts and other organisations, underlines the depth to which we have understood this. There are very few people in the UK – developers, local authorities or others – who do not understand this. Whatever the outcome of the controversy surrounding the future of the Cardiff Coal Exchange, it is a slice of heritage that received considerable publicity because of alleged improper actions, and the public cares deeply about that. With 3.5 million members, the National Trust may justly claim a mighty voice in speaking up for our historic fabric. In April this year, the Trust tragically lost the mansion at Clandon Park to fire, the BBC having not yet even screened the latest drama shot in and around the house. A century ago, faced with almost total loss, it is unlikely that reconstruction would have been contemplated. Today, as at the National Trust property at Uppark in southern England, which was seriously damaged in a fire in 1989 and reopened in 1995 after a full restoration, it seems inconceivable that it would not be. Our attitude and financial commitment to such work has changed, just as we have seen our abilities to achieve such works transformed, even with dwindling numbers of traditional craft apprentices.

So it is that we can be very proud that we have collectively helped evolve a set of laws and funding and created public sympathy that leads, albeit sometimes rather slowly and after some precarious times, to the stabilising, conservation and redevelopment of Ditherington Flax Mill in Shrewsbury in the west of England, the first building with iron beams and columns, completed in 1796. The great glass canopy at Tynemouth Station lives again thanks to

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support, funding and planning permissions that sought, above all, to secure greater footfall and economic use around the station, which brings in more money to secure future maintenance.

Rather more problematic are the classes of single-use structures, like the Grade I-listed Jodrell Bank radio telescope. This may face an assured short-term future, combatting fatigue to continue studying pulsars in our galaxy, but in the long-term it and other pioneering but dedicated goliaths, including the Grade II\*-listed Warrington Transporter Bridge over the River Mersey, completed in 1916, face difficult decisions as we – and our society – balance the preservation of what have become static artefacts with the conservation of some of the other, rather more useful, old tools still available for our use. But the fact that they are difficult to maintain does not mean we have not valued them.

In this issue we look at Ironbridge, itself perhaps rather more of an artefact than a tool; a public footbridge but a somewhat expensive one to maintain, which is an essential element of a UNESCO

World Heritage site: an extraordinary and irreplaceable artefact, a landmark of the Industrial Revolution. To understand what cultural heritage really means in the UK, one has only to rewind to the scene ‘Pandemonium’ from film director Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony to the 2012 London Olympic Games, at the end of which five glowing iron rings were symbolically poured from pig-iron out of the furnaces of Coalbrookdale and lifted high above the main stadium. The one billion viewers might as well have been watching the arches of Ironbridge being cast and hauled upright across the River Severn.

We take all this largely for granted and I return to Syria, abruptly. As we go through our next articles and prepare our next conference papers, as we plan our next talk or return to our next paid piece of consultancy, perhaps we might remember to take some motivation from a desire to carry the past into the present and future, to put it on show and interpret it for our colleagues and children, and to give that task a little passion in the spirit alluded to by Dr Bokova and displayed in the dedication of Professor al-Asaad.