

16TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL TRUSTS – SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

The International National Trusts Organisation (INTO) held its biennial conference in Cambridge, UK, from 7-11 September 2015, hosted by the National Trust of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

With the theme, *Common threads; Different patterns*, the 16th International Conference of National Trusts (ICNT) set out to explore the question ‘what is the role and purpose of the National Trust movement in the 21st Century?’.

INTO’s role is to make the National Trust movement greater than the sum of its parts by providing a global focal point through which the movement, from every corner of the earth, comes together and works

together. The ICNT provides the space for this to happen in real time and it was wonderful to see so many of INTO’s 65 member organisations and other delegates from across the world in Cambridge last week. Thanks are due to our sponsors, especially those who have enabled attendance from such a wide range of countries, including American Express, the Helen Hamlyn Trust and the Headley Trust.



The week began with the INTO Congress on Monday 7 September, during which Dame Fiona Reynolds was elected the new Chairman of INTO, succeeding Professor Simon Molesworth, who has led the organisation for the last ten years. New Executive Committee members and officers were also elected – see our [website](#) for the full list.

The Congress closed with an address from Europa Nostra’s Executive President Denis de Kergorlay and Secretary General Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović entitled ‘From Europa Nostra to Terra Nostra: Global Heritage Movement without Borders’. They also thanked the outgoing Chairman for his ‘inspiring leadership’ and welcomed the incoming Chair, reaffirming their commitment to reinforcing the mutually beneficial partnership between Europa Nostra and INTO initiated in 2009.



Dame Helen Ghosh, Director General of the National Trust for England, Wales & Northern Ireland, then officially opened the 16th International Conference of National Trusts and reminded delegates of the need to be open to change as we seek to conserve our heritage.

We also heard a welcome from HRH The Prince of Wales who urged them to ‘continue



to hold the line in the face of development threats’ and to put people at the heart of what we do. His Royal Highness ended by saying how he hoped the conference ‘will result in a valuable exchange of ideas leading to an even closer understanding between all those who serve such a great movement’.

Eminent environmentalist, Jonathon Porritt challenged delegates with a speech about our environmental challenges that was referenced throughout the week. He highlighted the importance of our organisations as trusted custodians of what really matters and trusted interpreters to help people understand what is unfolding around them. He called on our participants to take from the past, inform the present and change the future.

The conference also heard from Professor Ruan Yisan, a campaigner for heritage preservation in China. China’s growth as a major world economy has meant that whole towns, many of them deeply historical, have been razed to the ground in favour of new development. Professor Ruan’s work in Shanghai and the Yangtze River Water Towns has saved many architectural treasures but as China has no laws for the protection of its heritage, historic structures are at risk from total destruction at any time.

As we look across the globe at what is happening to our built and natural environments – from the destruction of Palmyra in Syria to the new threats (such as from floods and droughts) posed by climate change – there is a danger that we will throw up our hands in despair.

Yet a message from the conference was that we can rightly look forward to a more optimistic future for our cultural heritage. As David Brown from the US National Trust for Historic Preservation eloquently put it, we need to find the words that will connect heritage preservation with the everyday concerns of people. Heritage is a key component to places, and people love the places where they live.

This was beautifully illustrated in the presentation of Shivranjani Rayje who spoke about the popularity of Mehrangarh Fort, which attracts a million visitors a year – with the Rajasthan International Folk Festival reaching millions worldwide.



Launch of ‘Partners in Preservation’ in Seattle

Helen Ghosh quoted one of her curators: ‘My role is all about taking a postcard from the past, bringing it to the present and sending into the future with a conservation stamp on it.’ And this was underlined by Emily Drani who reminded delegates ‘It is not a given that people understand and value heritage, there needs to be education’. Ambivalence about heritage may be its greatest challenge, and that’s true wherever you are on the globe.



The future will indeed bring many and varied challenges. However, with perseverance, loud voices, and strong governance, we will be able to ‘capture the light’ in the words of Simon Murray of the National Trust of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

To continue the textile metaphor, conference delegates were encouraged to bind the National Trusts of the world into a rich tapestry by celebrating the diversity of their work, and by sharing expertise in growing the movement (the business of heritage conservation – how to get better at fundraising, volunteer management, membership development); in owning and managing land and landscape and how to ensure that heritage remains relevant.



‘We’ve got the Power’ panel debate

We were also encouraged to speak with one voice – and to not be afraid of raising that voice. Later in the evening at a beautiful gala reception at King’s College, Loyd Grossman, Chairman of the Heritage Alliance and Churches Conservation Trust, called on the European and Global Heritage Alliances to speak up much more loudly.

Day two of the conference focussed on questions of cultural identity and the National Trust properties of Wicken Fen, Anglesey Abbey and Wimpole Hall provided the backdrop for some fascinating discussions and storytelling.

Delegates considered the importance of growing a nation’s love of heritage; of having national pride; of protecting places that may not be particularly unique or distinctive but that speak of people’s past and share the story of their history.

We were reminded in one session of a quote from Freeman Tildman: *‘The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation’* and of our role to tell the difficult stories of slavery, brutality, sexual orientation, racism. We heard how the Australian National Trust (Victoria) uses a historic



Great settings for workshops, here at Wimpole Hall

courtroom to hold debates with teenagers about the ethics and legalities of sexting. It was a great example of a National Trust working as a perhaps unexpected partner, and engaging with new generations on issues that matter to them. At Colonel John Ashley House in Massachusetts, as well as hearing about the American Revolution, visitors find out about a slave who worked in the household and who sued for freedom in 1781. This unsettles conventional narratives about the north and south in America.



Robben Island in Cape Town was cited as an example of a heritage site of conscience, where the visitor experience included being guided by former prisoners. The Magna Carta links at Anglesey Abbey, where some of these discussions took place, led to a conversation about bravery. How brave should National Trust places be in confronting visitors with unsettling or uncomfortable aspects of the past? In telling the story of Magna Carta, are we prepared to show how liberties have also been lost over time, as well as won?



Participants 'testing' the silage at Wimpole Home Farm

Tuesday evening ended with the pop-up 'INTO Debate 2015', hosted by new Chairman, Fiona Reynolds in the beautiful, arts and crafts All Saints Church, Cambridge.



INTO Debate 2015, All Saints Church, Cambridge

Simon Murray, Fadlullah Wilmot of Muslim Aid, cultural resource expert June Taboroff and Henry Fraser of the Barbados National Trust led an open discussion about global heritage issues and what opportunities there were for the National Trust movement to counter some of the challenges and threats. It was felt that a better international response to current heritage tragedies was needed and Charles Alluto of the National Trust of Jersey spoke for everyone when he said 'Stop being polite and bring back the campaigning spirit the National Trust movement was founded on!'.

On Wednesday, the conference caravan moved to Suffolk. The day started in the grand surroundings of the Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds, a working Regency theatre built in 1819 and looked after by the National Trust of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

'Growing the Movement' was the theme and the first session *No Trust is an Island* gave the stage to INTO member organisations who shared best practice case studies. As we live in an increasingly connected and global world, not only do the actions of one population affect people and environments faraway, but equally people can understand, value and desire the protection of places without having visited them.

Which is why social media and new ways to engage with our audiences were such a recurring theme throughout the conference. We heard from Timothy McClimon, President of the American Express Foundation and sponsor of this morning, about their Partners in Preservation, which uses social



media to raise awareness and engage people in debates about cultural heritage. The project, which is a partnership between American Express and the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the USA, involves public votes for the places that are felt to best deserve funding for historic preservation. Natalie Bull also described how the National Trust for Canada had been inspired by this programme to run a crowdfunding project to raise funds for saving threatened lighthouses, [This Lighthouse Matters](#).



Kate Mavor, Chief Executive of English Heritage, spoke eloquently about ways to increase participation in preservation. Celebrated author Xinran, conveyed her passion for the English countryside and how she hoped China might learn from the National Trust movement.

Delegates also heard about the [Trust Youth Centre](#) in Japan, the establishment of a [Czech National Trust](#) and how the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda was inspired by the Zimbabwe National Trust into producing a [walking guide for Kampala](#), and how it funded its publication through the INTO challenge event in Galicia last year. A fabulous success story!

Delegates spent the afternoon at Ickworth, a Georgian Italianate palace in an idyllic English landscape just outside Bury St Edmunds with the *Growing the Movement* sessions providing the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences around a wide variety of issues including volunteering, governance, campaigning, communicating brand and cause, fundraising and different business models.



Another great workshop discussion, Ickworth

One example from the campaigning group was the Rampal power plant in Bangladesh, a new coal-powered power station that is proposed to be built just 14 km from Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest. Civil society organisations have used all the different tools available to them to try to change the plans, from behind the scenes advocacy to direct public campaigning, fearful of the impact the development will have on a very precious piece of global heritage. Fighting battles like these is sometimes necessary, and can also help to win grassroots support for National Trust organisations, however big or small.



Thursday saw conference delegates discussing land, landscape and nature. Among the issues under debate were how to adapt our land management practices in a changing world, the relevance of farming issues to the National Trust movement, and how we are facing up to the challenges associated with water catchments, rivers and coasts (in this, the 50th anniversary year of our host's Neptune campaign).



With a growing population around the world, increased pressures on the land and continual technological changes, agriculture has been transformed. Delegates considered the role our organisations have taken in conserving the tangible and intangible aspects of farming or leading the way in shaping its future. They also looked at landscape-scale approaches to conservation, whether in countryside or in urban areas. In the UK, much inspiration has come from John Lawton's report 'Making Space for Nature', which highlighted the significant loss of species in the last 60 years and the means by which this might be reversed through landscape-scale management policies.



There was interest in these ideas and some similar attempts to improve the natural environment were shared, such as through tree-planting schemes or by surveying bird life and encouraging farmers to adopt bird-friendly farming policies ('Birds on the Edge' in Jersey). There was much interest in the work the National Trust of England, Wales and Ireland is doing to promote access to nature for children and young people, including the Project Wild Thing film.

Delegates also discussed how radically different attitudes towards ownership can prevail in different cultures, and the circumstances in which economic, aesthetic or spiritual views of landscape can sometimes prevail over nature conservation priorities. Our different approaches to land, landscape and nature are part of the rich tapestry of the worldwide National Trust movement, even if we share common roots of wanting to look after special places for ever and for everyone. The final day of our International Conference of National Trusts looked to both past and future. We heard from Barbara Erickson of the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts, USA, an organisation that can justly lay claim to being the first ever National Trust. It was founded in 1891, four years before the National Trust in the UK. Its founder, landscape architect Charles Eliot, was inspired to act as a



result of the industrialisation and urbanisation of Boston. He drew inspiration from conversations with Octavia Hill and Robert Hunter, who were busy at the time with the formation of their own National Trust. Today, the Trustees of Reservations continues its work looking after precious countryside and coastlines, and engaging new audiences through its campaigning activities and creative partnerships.

We also heard from Patricia Zurita, Chief Executive of Birdlife International. Like the International National Trust Organisation, Birdlife is an umbrella body representing conservation organisations around the world. Its roots also go back to the creation of the International Council for Bird Preservation in 1922. Working internationally to care for birds makes a great deal of sense given the migratory habits of many important species. Yet Patricia also used the analogy of birds' flyways to make a point about the importance of international exchange among conservation groups. By clearing the channels of communication and agreeing on some important shared principles we can have a far greater impact on the issues facing the world today.

By contrast George Monbiot looked to the future, and challenged us to break the 'silences' that prevent action: the extraction of fossil fuels (all we currently talk about is their consumption); soil erosion (we have just 60 harvests left, according to one estimate); treatment of farm animals (he urged all National Trust cafés to turn vegetarian as a means of drawing attention to this); species decline (which is more rapid in upland areas of the UK, according to George, as a result of our farming practices there); ending with a plea to the assembled National Trusts of the world to 'ask how future generations might judge you, and live according to what they might ask of you, not just according to what the present demands'. The full text is available [here](#).

Reflecting on INTO's role as the focal point for the worldwide National Trust movement, new Chairman, Fiona Reynolds said it was important to remember the reasons we were founded, to look critically at what we're doing today, and to look forward and face new challenges.

Fiona focussed on the family nature of INTO and the National Trust movement, noting that families are best when they include all members, great and small. She said INTO would continue to make modest but catalytic contributions through the Small Grants Programme, develop the capacity of its member organisations, build on the success of our working holidays programme with additional volunteering opportunities, help establish more new Trusts and work on what it means to be a member of the INTO family.



New INTO Executive Committee and Secretariat

The need to celebrate our successes was also stressed – such as the 'best in class'



stories from Japan, Czech Republic, Uganda, Jersey and Canada. One of the outcomes of the conference will be the [INTO Knowledge Base Toolkit](#), a pack of the various resources referenced throughout the ICNT week.

And lastly, the ‘voice’. We will continue to develop INTO and all its members as the growing voice for heritage. Fiona said that to her, that was not so much about INTO as an institution but about us as a movement – as Loyd Grossman said, who we are, what we are and why heritage matters.



Over the course of the week, we heard inspiring and courageous stories from the Bolivia (who could fail to be inspired by the tenacious efforts to safeguard the Bickenbach country house in Cochabamba?) to Jersey (where the [Plémont](#) headland was restored to nature because of a line in the sand created by 7000 people holding hands for the coastline). And as we’ve seen, time and time again, INTO is there to help – bringing new advocates to a campaign, spreading the word, sharing ideas, promoting change.



But we will only ever be as good as our members. INTO only exists because of all they do. It is our job at INTO to enable the success of our member organisations and to win more support for our cause. INTO will work hard for its members, but it’s a partnership; a family where everyone matters.

It was all stirring and inspiring stuff and definite food for thought for our delegates as they began their journeys home.

But not before a beautiful performance of Balinese dancing, as a handover to the next International Conference of National Trusts, which takes place in Indonesia in 2017.

“Thank you for an absolutely brilliant, wonderful, game-changing week. The best I have ever experienced. With warm wishes” *Sara Lampitt, National Trust Guernsey*

