

For everyone, for ever: A History of the global National Trust movement

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(From a speech delivered at the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach on 9 January 2020)

Next week you are celebrating 40 years of the Preservation Foundation. What a wonderful achievement!

You should be very proud of everything you've done to save and restore the beautiful places and nature, that make Palm Beach so special. And all your work to encourage the community to learn, be moved and inspired by what they see around them.

Thank you to everyone who brought us together today (especially Katie Jacob, who I got to know about five years ago when she was awarded a US/ICOMOS scholarship to the UK) – and thank you all, for all you have done over the past forty years and continue to do, every day to conserve, breathe life into and celebrate the history of Palm Beach.

I'm delighted to be your first lecturer of the year, and amongst such an impressive programme of speakers, including a lot of friends like Trudy Coxe next week from Newport Mansions, and Katherine Malone-France of the US National Trust for Historic Preservation later in January.

There are lots of good and close connections between the preservation movements of the United States and the United Kingdom. And it's wonderful to be here. To be part of a moment when two great institutions on different sides of the Atlantic celebrate their respective birthdays and achievements.



Lighting a beacon

Earlier today in the UK, beacons were lit to mark 125 years of the National Trust. The Trust was actually founded on 12 January 1895, so your birthdays really are only three days apart!

And I wonder where the Preservation Foundation will be in 85 years' time, bearing in mind that in its 40th year, the National Trust had 4,850 members, three permanent staff and only two country houses – one ruined and the other empty? I'm sure the coming years will see

similar growth and development for you. And I hope the story I'm going to share today might give you some inspiration and hope.

We are all in this together. We all want the same thing. We want to look after places so that people and nature can thrive in them. This was something that the founders of the National Trust movement understood. And it's quite universal. That desire to connect us all with great landscape and great culture. And to inspire us to greater things today through our appreciation of heritage and knowledge of our past. It links back to critical human needs, whoever we are, wherever we come from.

We need history, we need nature and we need beauty.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, I want to tell you a little about the history of the National Trust and how it has inspired a global heritage movement.

I'm hoping some of you have visited National Trust sites during visits to the United Kingdom. The Trust, an independent charity, today owns over 500 heritage properties. These include historic houses and gardens, industrial monuments, and social history sites. Many of which are open to the public, usually for a charge, although free for members, of which there are nearly 6 million.

It's not the oldest heritage preservation organisation in the world, however.

The roots of a movement

This magical stave church is looked after by the Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments (Fortidsminneforeningen) that was established in 1844 by artists and students who 'discovered' Norway's cultural heritage during academic excursions to rural districts and valleys.

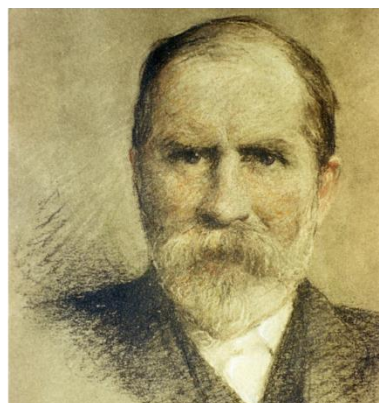
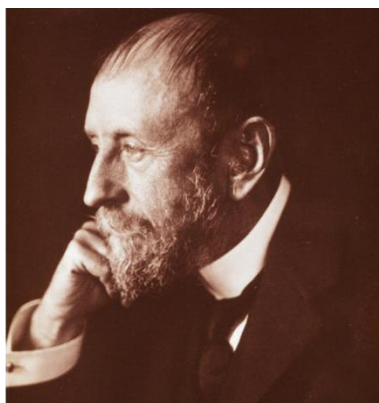


And here in America, you have the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts which began in 1891 in response to the rapid population growth and industrialisation of the Boston area. Charles Eliot, a young landscape architect highlighted the need for urban green space. And to protect these places, with “uncommon beauty and more than usual refreshing power”, Eliot proposed a non-profit organisation which would hold land, free of taxes, for the public to enjoy ‘just as a Public Library holds books and an Art Museum holds pictures’. And so, began the Trustees of Reservations, the world’s oldest land trust.

The founders of the National Trust actually met Charles Eliot, who was greatly influenced by their early ideas when he started the Trustees, which in turn was a model for the constitution of the National Trust. More, good trans-Atlantic collaboration!

The need for quiet and beauty

So, I hope I’m painting a picture of on the one hand, urbanisation, people living in smog-ridden overcrowded cities, cut off from the countryside. And on the other a growing appreciation of the importance of access to nature and culture. And it was against this background that the National Trust was started.



By three extraordinary people, Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley. Each had a slightly different reason for wanting to create this vehicle for looking after beautiful, natural and historic places for future generations (“for everyone, for ever”).

Octavia Hill

Octavia Hill was a social reformer, concerned not just with the alleviation of poverty, but with beauty too. When she designed and built a block of social housing in South London, she prioritised gardens that provided much needed open space, fresh air and flowers. She wrote at the time:

“We all want quiet. We all want beauty ... We all need space.”

Like Charles Eliot, Octavia fought tirelessly to protect urban green space in London, not always successfully. One of her first campaigns was to oppose the development of part of North London, known as Swiss Cottage Fields, in 1875. The battle was unsuccessful, but it did connect her to the Commons Preservation Society and Robert Hunter.

Sir Robert Hunter

Sir Robert Hunter was a lawyer who was very concerned about the enclosure of common land around London. He was a leading light of the Commons Preservation Society and in 1884 made a speech about 'a voluntary land-holding preservation association'. Indeed, this was the work that had such a profound influence on Charles Eliot who went on to visit Hardwicke Rawnsley when he was in Europe on the Grand Tour the following year.

Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley

Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley was a vicar in the Lake District, determined to preserve their natural beauty. He was the Trust's first real campaigner – always there, always involved, and always encouraging others to get involved.

In 1883 he worked with Octavia Hill and Robert Hunter to stop the construction of quarry railways in the fells overlooking Buttermere, which threatened to damage the unspoilt scenery.

And slowly the three founders conceived of a trust that could buy and preserve places of natural beauty and historic interest for the benefit of the nation.

The Commons and Gardens Trust?

In November 1893, the three founders met in the offices of the Commons Preservation Society and agreed to launch such a trust. Octavia thought it should be called 'The Commons and Gardens Trust', but the three agreed to adopt Hunter's suggested title. And the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty was officially founded on 12 January 1895.

Interestingly at an early meeting, the Duke of Westminster, who was the first patron of the National Trust predicted 'Mark my words, Miss Hill, this is going to be a very big thing'

Their first property

It was not long before the Trust acquired its first property. On 29 March 1895, Mrs Fanny Talbot, a friend of the founders, gave the Trust 4 ½ acres of land on the coast of South Wales called Dinas Oleu, or Fortress of Light

She was thrilled that the Trust had been established as she wanted to secure Dinas Oleu for 'public enjoyment' but didn't want it 'vulgarised' with 'asphalt paths' or 'cast iron seats of serpentine design'. She wrote: "it appears to me that your association has been born in the nick of time to be my friend. If your trust will accept it, Dinas Oleu shall be yours so soon as lawyers can make arrangements."

Octavia Hill said at the time: "We have our first piece of property – I wonder if it will be our last?"

Alfriston Clergy House

Well it wasn't and in 1896 the Trust launched a public appeal to raise the £10 needed to buy Alfriston Clergy House. And over the years since these early acquisitions, the Trust has

changed and grown into the largest voluntary conservation organisation in Europe. It would seem that the Duke was a better prophet than Octavia Hill!

So modest vernacular buildings, clergy houses and post offices were among the first to be saved, along with areas of countryside, particularly in the Lake District.



Mrs Heelis

Rawnsley had a great friend there, a farmer and conservationist named Mrs Heelis who went on to be a fervent supporter of the burgeoning National Trust. As a young girl, she had spent many happy holidays in the Lakes, which inspired her interest in nature, story-writing and drawing.

Back in London in 1902, Frederick Warne & Co published her first book in an initial run of 8,000, which sold out instantly. She used the profits of the sale of these early books to buy her first farm in the Lakes, called Hill Top.

When Mrs Heelis died in 1943, she left 4,000 acres of land and countryside to the National Trust, as well as 14 farms. Her legacy lives on, not least in the fact that the National Trust Headquarters is called Heelis in her honour. You will probably know her better by her maiden name, which was ... Beatrix Potter.

Countryside

The Trust now cares for more than 617,000 acres of countryside (that's about the size of Luxembourg, I'm told) and is the largest private landowner in the UK, the second largest in all after the Forestry Commission.

The Trust has always responded to the needs of the nation. First, as I've described, to rampant development, industrialisation and a growing urban population. And then in the 1930s, the Trust began its Country Houses Scheme.



Country Houses Scheme

I'm sure you're all far too young to remember the time (!) but this was an era of great economic depression, social upheaval, aristocratic heirs dying in the wars and people no longer wanting to work in service, which meant that many large country houses were simply unviable and being abandoned.

In 1955, one house was demolished every five days.

The Trust made an agreement with the government to take on country houses in lieu of inheritance tax and many of the 300 or so that it owns and opens to the public today came via that route. And many of them came along with huge estates, farms and even villages. The Trust owns 56 villages in fact. (And 39 pubs!)



Enterprise Neptune

After the war, peace time meant an expanding population, with more money and more leisure time. And this led people out of the cities and into the countryside, particularly to the seaside. Now, you'd think that would be well in line with the mission of the National

Trust. But an unintended side effect was more development at the coast. And not very nice development either. Bungalows and caravan parks, marinas, even power stations were often sited on some of the most beautiful parts of our coastline.

So, 70 years after it had been established, the Trust launched Enterprise Neptune in 1965. It surveyed the coast and began to acquire parts of it that were a risk. Today it owns over 780 miles of coast and seashore.

Having focussed on places all this time, the 1980s and 90s were almost entirely focussed on people, giving them access to places through visiting, walking, swimming, learning or simply enjoying. The Trust even bought the summit of Mount Snowdon in 1998 after a huge public appeal, led by the Welsh actor, Sir Anthony Hopkins, who gave £1m.



Social history

The Trust diversified again with its 'social acquisitions' at the turn of the century, starting with Mr Straw's House, a 1920s time capsule of a middle-class grocer; two of the Beatles' childhood homes in Liverpool; a courtyard of back to backs in Birmingham; and a workhouse.

One might wonder what Octavia Hill would have thought of 'her Trust' preserving a workhouse, the very place she strove to keep people out of! But these acquisitions do go back to the smaller, vernacular buildings that the Trust began with and tell the stories of 'real' people, which our visitors can relate to.

The point is that over 125 years, the Trust has responded to the concerns and preoccupations of each new generation with courage and enthusiasm.

The challenge of Tyntesfield

When current INTO Chair, Fiona Reynolds became Director-General of the National Trust in 2001, she almost immediately faced the challenge of Tyntesfield. This extraordinary Victorian Gothic mansion suddenly came on the market in 2002. Its owner, Lord Wraxhall, had died naming 19 beneficiaries in his will. The sale particulars were published, and Kylie Minogue was rumoured to be interested in buying. But reports started coming back about the amazing and exciting contents of the house, not just the art work but all the paraphernalia of life, of kitchen utensils, clothes – not unlike Mr Straw’s House, just on a massive scale!



The Trust fell in love with Tyntesfield and wanted to keep it in tact so launched one of the biggest appeals it has ever run. People responded immediately and with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Tyntesfield was saved. Part of the deal with the Lottery was that Trust would look after Tyntesfield in a different way. The Trust did not close Tyntesfield for years while it prepared it for opening. It opened for the public less than six weeks after acquisition. There were no toilets, no tea room, no shop, no car park ... and people loved it. It was as if the sign saying ‘Staff only’ had been taken down. And the Trust did all the conservation work in front of the public, often using volunteer labour.

Arms wide open

It really did mark the beginning of a new era. Arms wide open. Not ‘arms closed’. It’s OK, we’ve got it, we’ll look after it. Look, don’t touch, but ‘arms open’. This is a place we all love, we all share in and we want everyone to feel part of what we’re trying to do.

It led to changes across all National Trust properties with fires being lit in grates that had been empty since the aristocratic families had left, pianos played, and books read.

Urban heritage and nature

Most recently, the Trust has turned its attention to urban heritage and the places where people live, like this historic swimming pool in Birmingham. Not places that are necessarily owned by the Trust but helping other people to look after places that are important to them, often in urban areas.

Leap for Nature

And today the Trust has made three new commitments as part of its birthday celebrations: Becoming carbon neutral by 2030; planting 20,000,000 trees in ten years and working with partners to develop green corridors out of urban areas.

Interestingly this is business as usual for many of the Trust's sister organisations around the world which, not having the same history of acquisitions, work by default with sites owned by other organisations and individuals.

Back in the day, the Trust was offered property in other countries – and indeed actually took on for a while Kanturk Castle in Southern Ireland. But today it limits itself to owning sites in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. But its influence on the global conservation community is reflected in the growth of over fifty National Trusts in other countries around the world, all inspired by the original 1895 National Trust model.

A National Trust for Scotland and Jersey

The earliest Trusts were established in the British Isles with the National Trust for Scotland being the first in 1931, closely followed by the National Trust for Jersey in 1936.



Completely separate from the National Trust, these societies were nonetheless enthused by the vision of the three founders. And saw the National Trust approach as a way to safeguard and permanently protect places of historic interest and natural beauty from an ever-increasing tide of undesirable and insensitive development.

Obviously, the exact structure and legal status differs from country to country, but the ethos remains the same. National Trusts share a blessedly simple mission, to help people to value and protect their heritage. To look after nature, beauty, history. For everyone, for ever.

International National Trusts

And without them our heritage would become irrelevant and disappear. They also have an important role to play in community revitalisation and the National Trust model is helping nations meet many contemporary challenges – economic and social as well as environmental. There is a big focus on people. And civic engagement: “Everyone can get involved, everyone can make a difference.”



For the same reasons as the Trust wanting to protect the coastline – peace and stability leading to huge building programmes – National Trusts were established after the war in Australia in 1945, the Republic of Ireland the following year and here in the US in 1949.



The movement grows

The Isle of Man set up the Manx National Trust in 1951 and the Bahamas National Trust was established in 1959. The 1960s and 70s saw the movement swell with new Trusts, initially in the British Overseas Territories and Commonwealth countries: The National Trust of Guernsey and the Zimbabwe National Trust (1960); Din I-Art Helwa the National Trust of Malta (1965); the Japan National Trust (1968); the Montserrat National Trust (1969); the Bermuda and Fiji National Trusts (1970); the Swaziland National Trust Commission (1972); Heritage Canada the National Trust (1973); FAI, the Italian National Trust; the Saint Lucia National Trust (1975) and The Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, New Zealand (1977).



More recently, National Trusts have been established in India (1984); the Cayman Islands (1987); St Kitts (1989); the Falklands (1991); Turks & Caicos (1992); Anguilla (1993); Slovakia and Taiwan (1996); Trinidad and Tobago (1999); Korea and Romania (2000); St Helena (2001).



The newest members of the INTO movement are in Indonesia (2004); Sri Lanka (2005); China (2006); Portugal (2010); Galicia and Yangon (2012); Czech Republic (2013), Bavaria (2015) and Georgia (2016).

You'll see that they become successively less concerned with grand mansions and more with vernacular buildings, nature, skills and people. Which I think means they have retained that crusading spirit of Octavia Hill.

Threats to heritage

The global National Trust movement has had 125 years to mature. And yet the challenges we are grappling with are similar to those which spurred on the Victorian philanthropists back in 1895. Wherever we are in the world, heritage and nature are in a precarious position. Under threat from neglect, poor planning, climate change and conflict.

Their vision of is as pertinent now as it was then. And indeed, the Trust has been constant in pursuing their mission – to protect places for everyone, for ever. And not just the places history tells us are important, but the places people tell us are important too.

Octavia Hill argued: 'We want some beautiful things for our daily enjoyment, and near us. Not on rare holidays, not for those who have money, but day by day'.



International National Trusts Organisation

So today, set against this background of nature and green space under threat – and apathy on behalf of people and politicians about the value of heritage, there is also a growing awareness of the value of international collaboration.

Our work is not something that can be neatly parcelled into discrete national packages and the protection of our built, cultural and natural heritage depends on global co-operation.

The Trust's message of "Nature, beauty, history. For everyone for ever" is as relevant here in Palm Beach as it is in London or Yangon or Milan or Sidney

Wherever you live, whoever you are, access to culture is important – it should not be a privilege or a luxury, it is vital to understanding who we are.

And so, when heritage is deliberately destroyed, whether that's in the Middle East or on our doorsteps, the wounds run deep. Destroy heritage, place and history and you strike at the very heart and soul of society.

Power of heritage to bring people together

But could the opposite not be true? Could we not use heritage, the environment, culture to draw communities together? To offer a safe and shared space for dialogue, partnership and bridge building?

Octavia Hill saw that, and her hope was that the National Trust might be a mechanism for addressing inequalities through beauty, through inspiration, through access to open space. And she would have said that no one community's heritage is somehow 'better' or more worthy of protection than another's. It's what that community values that's important.

Family, growth and voice

Which is why INTO has such an important role to play. Established in 2007 from informal links which had started in the 1970s, INTO is the umbrella body for the global family of National Trusts which comes together to share ideas, expertise and resources, to grow the capacity of existing organisations and to establish new Trusts in countries where they do not currently exist, and to be a global voice for matters of common concern.

We have over 80 members now who all take great pride in being part of the global family and understand the benefit of reaching out to their counterparts in other countries to share and to learn, to inspire and to be inspired and to work together on projects.

Whatever our differences in approach, we have a common name and a common purpose. And by coming together as INTO from the four corners of the world, we can be greater than the sum of our parts.

Heritage is good for us

We know from research done here in the United States and back home in the United Kingdom that our cultural heritage and countryside has the power to uplift and inspire. Communities need culture and beautiful places. Wherever they are in the world. They are good for our health and well-being. Which means they are also good for society.

This is why what we all do is so important. It's not just about beautiful things. It's about the way these things glue our society together.

We live in a fractured and polarised world at the moment. Countries and alliances that traditionally worked in partnership are dividing. It may be grandiose to think that there is an opportunity for heritage conservation and historic preservation groups to engage visitors, to bring communities together both within nations and across international lines. But I think it is something to aspire to.



We have a job to do. Long as our histories are, we can't rest on our laurels. We need to continue to believe in the power of nature, beauty and history to make a difference. Just as Octavia Hill did.

I think she would have been surprised and delighted to know what the Trust has become today. She would probably also have been thrilled that her little acorn had inspired a global heritage movement.

So, it remains for me to say 'happy birthday' to the National Trust and 'happy birthday' to the Preservation Foundation! May the next forty years be as positive as the last – and here's wishing you every success on that journey!