

NTS STRATEGIC ACQUISITIONS POLICY: FIRST THOUGHTS

Purpose

1. This note is to provoke action on the development of a strategic approach to property acquisition well beyond the narrow confines of the current acquisitions policy.

View of present position

2. The present approach is reactive rather than opportunistic, narrow in its vision of heritage rather than representative of the nation's natural and cultural heritage, and favours the rare, special and unique rather than the representative or common persons approach to perpetual conservation. It is essential for NTS to have a more strategic approach to its acquisitions.
3. Too often NTS is regarded by, its members, other supporters, the public and the government as the last resort purchaser. This is not the case in practice. Given the dearth of well-resourced heritage bodies in Scotland, especially in the built and cultural heritage sectors, then it is more often than not the first resort source for purchase. NTS approaches property acquisition largely on a reactive basis: focuses on what is coming on the market as a distress sale where it feels a moral responsibility to do something to secure a heritage asset for the benefit of the nation. It is rarely opportunistic as it has no clear view of what it should own and has carefully avoided the notion of a heritage portfolio of properties. It is driven by a set of acquisition guidelines that are best described as low level with no strategic sense of the breadth or narrowness of ownership.
4. Critics of NTS consider that it is only interested in castles and great houses; this is a widely held perception which helps to define a rather elitist approach to heritage and to the work of NTS. Whilst this view ignores the many mountain and countryside properties, it is a fair point as there is virtually no representation of the ordinary people's heritage of factories, public buildings and residences, or of the great figures of Scottish history, or of our industrial heritage. So we have to change others perception of us if we are to properly fulfil our remit.
5. I do not advocate that we should be setting out to acquire a representative selection of all heritage property in Scotland. This is neither desirable for one body to achieve, nor affordable for NTS when the future emphasis has to be on better management of our existing properties. But we should be much more systematic in our approach to opportunities – what I call 'strategic opportunism' - and to be in a position to take a much more proactive approach where we consider that this is justified. This needs a shift of mentality from the rare and unique defined in a narrow area of heritage, i.e. 'it is the only example or the very best example syndrome', to a broader set of properties more representative of Scotland's history.

How do we set about the task?

6. In the natural heritage field I am most familiar with, there is a very systematic approach to identifying the important, unique, rare and representative. The spatial unit under review: whole world, continent, national or smaller, is subdivided into its natural units defined on the basis of key natural attributes: topography, substrate, soils, climate). Within each of these natural regions the

landscapes, ecosystems, habitats and species (in descending scale order) are identified. Criteria are established to assess the relative importance at each level, to identify particularly rare and unique facets, and to define representative sites/areas for each level. A comprehensive approach to the protection of the most special places, usually called 'protected areas', and mechanisms for safeguarding the broader environmental systems and process on which their healthy survival depends are then put in place.

7. In Scotland, we have not done such an exercise in its entirety, but the groundbreaking SNH 'Futures' programme had this as a longer term objective, as does the rather more prosaic approach of the EU's Natura 2000 programme of species and habitat protection.
8. There must be systematic ways of making a similar approach for the built and cultural heritage. For example, dividing human history into its main periods, identifying the formative people and events in our history, identifying the main styles of buildings, interior design, paintings and other decorative arts, etc. Assessments should not focus purely on the physical manifestations of our heritage, but on the key movements, personalities, and events which shaped the Scottish nation to what it is today.
9. Along side setting up a systematic structure, the present properties should be assessed from a portfolio perspective: what heritage attributes do they represent? An overall assessment will then need to be developed. First, to consider the overlaps and duplication within our present properties, and then to identify what are the gaps in relation to the main periods of our history.
10. What I have in mind as the output from the exercise is:
 - (1) a simple checklist of the key attributes of our heritage: events, personalities, movements,
 - (2) a list of the main formative periods of our human and natural history,
 - (3) means of assessing relative importance of items under (1),
 - (4) assessment of 1, 2, and 3 against existing properties, and
 - (5) identification of the main gaps in the representation of Scotland's heritage in our portfolio.

Next steps

11. This topic is one which could generate more heat than light and go on for ever if we are not careful. We need momentum, focus and closure. The Conservation Committee, working with expert staff around the organisation, especially in Conservation and Property Services, should take the lead. We would benefit from outside volunteer help by those who do not carry baggage, such as the Historiographer Royal for Scotland.
12. I suggest that we invite Peter Burman to lead on this with input from Conservation Committee members and with the policy staff in charge of the property acquisition guidelines as the support person.

Roger Crofts
Convenor
NTS Conservation Committee
November 2005