



## **Testing times: fighting culture's corner in an age of austerity<sup>1</sup>**

### **A response by RESCUE - The British Archaeological Trust<sup>2</sup>**

RESCUE - The British Archaeological Trust welcomes Maria Miller's public support for the nation's cultural sector as expressed in her speech at the British Museum on 24<sup>th</sup> April and in particular her acknowledgement that the heritage and cultural sectors both play an important contributory role in the national economy. RESCUE has drawn attention on numerous occasions to the data included in the annual Heritage Counts reports<sup>3</sup> which amply attest to the particular significance of the heritage sector as a contributor to both the national and regional economies through internal and foreign tourism and also to the essential role played by heritage in education at all levels. The support of the Heritage Lottery Fund has been of particular significance in extending public participation in the heritage sector with all the community, educational and health benefits that this entails. RESCUE finds itself agreeing with the Minister's statements regarding the importance of culture and is happy to join the Minister in emphasising the importance of the cultural sector as a whole to the economy and wider society.

Unfortunately, this is the limit of our agreement with the Minister.

We have seen Government support for the heritage sector shrink dramatically under both the present and previous administrations. English Heritage suffered a cut of 32% in its budget under the comprehensive spending review of 2010, which followed cuts of more than 11% under the previous government. The organisation, which ought to be taking a leading role in the promotion of our archaeological and built heritage, has been significantly reduced in its capacity to respond to both threats and opportunities as a result. In 2012 ALGAO<sup>4</sup> estimated that the provision of historic environment services by local authorities had dropped by 25% since

2006. RESCUE has monitored the substantial reduction in staffing levels in museums and local heritage services since 2010 and notes that one of the Minister's flagship examples, Liverpool, together with Merseyside as a whole, no longer maintains a Historic Environment Record, the essential tool which ensures that a concern for the national heritage lies at the core of the planning and development process. This is in direct violation of the Government's commitments under the Valetta Convention<sup>5</sup> and the principles underlying the National Planning Policy Framework<sup>6</sup>. If a former European Capital of Culture can dispense with its obligations towards its local cultural heritage then what chance do other areas have? Successive governments have failed to respond to calls from a wide range of heritage organisations for the institutionalisation of heritage protection by making the maintenance of a Historic Environment Record a statutory responsibility on local authorities. This step would represent the single most effective means of ensuring that our archaeological and built heritage is protected and as such would make a major contribution to ensuring that our heritage continues to play a key role in the national economy and the cultural life of the nation. The cost would be negligible but the effects would be significant.

The Minister draws attention to the use of the slogan *Heritage is GREAT* by Visit Britain but fails to acknowledge that the last few years have seen unprecedented cuts to museum staffing levels with a massive loss of expertise and experience at both the local and the national level. How the heritage sector is supposed to contribute to GREATNESS when it is losing its finest practitioners at an alarming rate is unclear and we look to the Minister for an explanation of this point.

At the same time archaeology faces a crisis with local and regional museums unable to accommodate archives and collections from excavations across the country owing to a lack of suitable storage space. Archaeology as a profession has long since embraced the market and has functioned in a commercial environment since 1991. Throughout this time we have seen a marked reluctance by local and national government to accept their responsibility to provide safe, secure and accessible storage for our national archaeological archives. Today we stand on the threshold of the actual destruction of such archives, either completely or in part simply because there is no room for them in our museums. Governments rightly condemn the activities of fanatics and extremists abroad which destroy cultural monuments and archaeological sites for ideological and sectarian reasons but seem happy to turn a blind eye to the imminent destruction of archaeological archives in the UK when this is legitimised by budgetary constraints.

No one can claim that this cultural impoverishment represents

GREATNESS in any shape or form.

The private and commercial sectors have fulfilled their side of the bargain by funding archaeology through the planning process but this commitment has not been matched by government either at the local or the national level. RESCUE regards this as a nothing short of a betrayal of our national heritage and of the efforts made by both professional archaeologists and by thousands of volunteers and enthusiasts who are trying to deliver the financial, educational and other benefits that accrue from an active and self-aware heritage sector.

RESCUE sees the Minister's speech as a missed opportunity to set out a programme of minor but effective legislative change that would make the maintenance of regional museum archives and HERs a statutory obligation on local authorities – such a change would match the commitment that the heritage sector has already made to meeting the Minister's four challenges<sup>7</sup> and might go some way to persuading the heritage sector that the government sees culture and heritage as a vital part of the nation's economy and sense of self-worth and not merely an opportunity for empty self-promotion and self-congratulation.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>A response to the keynote speech delivered by the Rt. Hon. Maria Miller MP at the British Museum on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>2</sup>RESCUE is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting archaeology in Britain and abroad. Details of RESCUE's work can be found on the website: [www.rescue-archaeology.org.uk](http://www.rescue-archaeology.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup>Details of the annual Heritage Counts surveys can be found here: <http://hc.english-heritage.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup>ALGAO; Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers: <http://www.algao.org.uk/>

<sup>5</sup>Details of the terms of the Valetta Convention can be found here: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/143.htm>

RESCUE contends that Britain is in breach of Articles 2 (i), 4 (iii) and 5 (i, ii and iii)

<sup>6</sup>Details of the National Planning Policy Framework can be found here: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>At the end of her speech Ms Miller called for four commitments by arts and cultural leaders:

- to continue to build resilience, self-confidence and self-reliance;
- to seek out new artistic and commercial opportunities;
- to position yourself squarely within the visitor economy;
- and to look for international opportunities which will benefit Britain.

RESCUE asserts that the heritage sector generally and archaeology in particular has already embraced these commitments and now looks to a commitment from local and national government to putting in place a programme legislative and practical reform that will allow the benefits of current practice to be realised for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

Further information about RESCUE can be obtained from our website or from members of our committee:

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