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Applying recreated authenticity to historic buildings in the name of their conservation

Simon Jenkins' apologia for heritage industry "Disneyfication" (- as discussed in our [last post](#)) was echoed by Simon Thurley, the Chief Executive of English Heritage, in last weekend's Financial Times ("Disneyland with footnotes or ancient skills revived"). Thurley claimed that at Stirling Castle, Historic Scotland has "recreated Queen Mary's Lodgings with a fearsome degree of authenticity", even though it had almost no surviving interior material to go on, other than "a few chimney pieces and a couple of doors". Such an oxymoronic combining of the terms "re-creation" and "authenticity" merits examination. Current attempts to remake history are occurring in a distinctly complacent and insufficiently examined cultural/bureaucratic context.

The peg for Thurley's article was the payment by Historic Scotland of one of those nicely rounded restoration bills (£25m) queried by the Daily Telegraph blogger, [Andrew Brown](#) in response to a public appeal for a neat half a million pounds to "conserve" Roald Dahl's writing hut by moving its contents to the nearby Roald Dahl museum as a "major new interactive exhibit" for school groups and "thousands of visitors a year".

The Royal Palace at Stirling Castle was built in the late 1530s for King James V and his wife Mary of Guise but it had been used as a barracks for nearly 300 years. £12m was spent "putting the interiors of the palace to rights" (Fig. 1) and £2m alone was spent copying the (authentic) Unicorn Tapestries in the Cloisters Museum, New York (Fig. 2). Thurley cites as an antecedent for this kind of hypothetical "recreation", the Governor's House in Williamsburg, Virginia, which having been burned to the ground in 1781 was rebuilt as new in the 1930s (Figs. 3 & 4). Although Thurley sniffs "This was not restoration; it was a recreation" he seems untroubled that the original authentic contents of the Stirling Castle interiors had been lost before the Governor's House was first built. While noting that although the Williamsburg rebuilding was



Above, Fig. 1: One of the main rooms at James V's Palace at Stirling which is said to be "much as it may have looked on completion around 1545".



Above, Fig. 2: A detail of one of the copies of the Unicorn tapestries in the Cloisters Museum, New York.



Above, Fig. 3: The front of the Governor's House in Williamsburg, Virginia.

judged by some American academics and most European curators to be “Disneyland with footnotes” when just such recreations were later made on this continent in the wake of the devastation of the Second World War, Thurley misses the fact that frankly declared attempts to recreate historically and architecturally important buildings on the basis of surviving visual and documentary evidence are of a different order from Britain’s heavily bureaucratized drive to convert old buildings, by means of speculative, “interactive”, historical enactments and vulgar websites that dangle Reality TV style soap operas as history, into tourism moneypots.

[English Heritage](#) explicitly states that the conservation movement has evolved from a “reactive process” that prevents change into a “flexible process” that recognizes the best way to save a building is “to find a new use for it.” It further admits that to achieve this more “constructive” end, “we work collaboratively with architects and developers at early pre-application stages”. Such collaborations spawn increasingly patronising and crass marketing campaigns.

At Stirling, a truck decorated with the castle’s Unicorn emblem constitutes “[The Stirling Castle Road Show](#)” which tours Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee offering city centre shoppers the chance to discover what is on offer at the castle for “a great day out”. Marketing Executive Nicola McCrae masterminds this “new way to promote the castle and visitor experience”. The visitor experience includes a deceiving invitation to: “step into the astonishing richness of royal life in the 1500s” by presenting James the Fifth’s palace as “one of the finest and best-preserved Renaissance buildings in Great Britain”. The claimed “crowning achievement” of this supposedly best-preserved palace is the banqueting hall (Figs. 5 & 6) where the original roof, which was removed in the late 1700s, has been replaced with a replica of an original roof that survives at Edinburgh Castle’s Great Hall. Replications and hypothetical reconstructions now abound at the castle.

In the King’s Inner Hall the ceiling-mounted brightly coloured roundels known as the Stirling Heads are facsimilies made from surviving original heads after their “painstaking conservation” (Fig. 7). On the basis of surviving scraps of colour on the carved wooden originals (which, mercifully, are exhibited in a separate gallery within the castle), the facsimilies have been speculatively painted in the “bright colours” that were “almost certainly” used originally. Colour looms large throughout these reconstructed interiors on the belief that they “would have been overwhelmingly colourful, rich and elaborate [because] James and his French wife Mary of Guise



Above, Fig. 4: The back of the Governor’s House in Williamsburg, as photographed around 1935 by [Frances Benjamin Johnston](#), one of America’s earliest female photographers.



Above and below, Figs. 5 & 6: The Banqueting Hall, Stirling Castle, which can be hired for corporate seminars, formal banquets or ceremonies.



aimed to present themselves as wealthy, learned and sophisticated.” The visitor will learn that “royalty ate well and entertained lavishly” but less of what their learning and their beliefs consisted.

The Palace contains a Chapel Royal that was one of the first Protestant churches in Scotland and retains authentic 17th century murals (Fig. 10). It was taken over by the army and became a dining hall, schoolroom and storerooms. Today, it can be hired for weddings and/or wedding receptions: “Stirling Castle’s Chapel Royal offers a spectacular area for a wedding ceremony, wedding reception, or pre-dinner drinks for those dining in the Great Hall.”

Speculative reconstructions reach their apotheosis with old bones (Fig. 8). In the Great Kitchen, visitors are invited to “Rub shoulders with the busy kitchen staff preparing food and drink for a royal banquet” – the said staff members being the ubiquitous heritage industry tableau dummies (Fig. 9): “This bustling scene has been re-created for visitors, with a soundtrack to help create the atmosphere.” A soundtrack from the 16th century? For such deceptive absurdities, visitors are charged £13 a head (£10 for “concessions”, £6.50 for children).

With a staff of 4,300 and comprising Europe’s largest conservation charity, the National Trust similarly hopes to achieve its seeming goal of preserving and protecting everything that doesn’t move by “encouraging millions of people to visit and enjoy their national heritage”. Keeping children – even small unruly ones – happy is seen as the key to maximising Heritage Income. The National Trust’s chairman, Simon Jenkins, [concedes](#) that although you cannot have blazing sun on a medieval tapestry, or children bouncing on an ancient bed, “it is jolly nice to have a bed they can bounce on somewhere.” To the charge of “Disneyfication” he responds “If it means making our properties more popular, then I am totally unrepentant.” There are other ways of presenting history. For those repelled by crassly commercial exploitations, we would commend the delightfully kept, privately-owned, magically tranquil ruins of [Jervaulx Abbey](#) in North Yorkshire.

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Above, Fig. 7: Some of the surviving original Stirling Heads, as exhibited in the castle museum.



Above, Fig. 8: A facial reconstruction of skeleton made for the Castle Exhibition where visitors can study a “cold case investigation of the injuries suffered by a man killed at Stirling about 1300.”



Above, Fig. 9: One of the Great Kitchen scenes, as re-created for visitors, with an accompanying soundtrack.



Above, Fig. 10: The Chapel Royal. On Scottish gala evenings “Following in the footsteps of kings and queens of centuries past... guests are welcomed by a piper for a drinks reception in the Chapel Royal.”

Click on the images above for larger versions. NOTE: zooming requires the [Adobe Flash Plug-in](#).

