

HISTORIC ENGLAND: COMMISSION MEETING 19 JULY 2016

CECIL RHODES DISCUSSION: NOTE

Roger Bowdler (RB) was invited to set out some of the issues surrounding this listing case. The Rhodes Building at Oriel College Oxford was upgraded to Grade II* in 2011 and one of the grounds of special interest identified was in the historical importance of Cecil Rhodes (CR). In December 2015 we were asked to assess the 1906 plaque to CR in King Edward Street, Oxford which was thought to be at risk of removal during the flurry of "Rhodes must fall" campaigning. Oriel College has subsequently confirmed that there is no immediate prospect of removal but welcomes the clarity provided by the determination of the listing case. Taken on its own, the plaque was listable as an unusual Edwardian portrait plaque which possessed clear historic interest because of Rhodes's career and his contribution to Oxford.

RB set the case against the background of HE's renewed engagement with history; recognised the sensitivity of the case in terms of the diversity agenda; talked about the need to reflect C21 values; and referred to HE's unique role as the protectors of tangible heritage, and providers of clarity as to its significance. Not all history was comfortable. AHRC had agreed to joint-fund an event looking at ways of reconciling existing memorials with new values. Whereas heritage could be seen as the presentation and appreciation of the remains of the past, history was a more dynamic intellectual engagement with the past: views were prone to change, and multiple views were to be expected.

Martin Daunton (MD) thought it absolutely wrong to take down such a plaque on the grounds that it depicted an uncomfortable episode from our past. Lola Young (LY) agreed: the past is contested, and warnings from the past should be heeded. There were nonetheless strong feelings abroad about valorising the past: celebrating imperial history while Black history continues to be ignored would provoke: Black British history is still searching for its place in the national story. Communities don't feel respected if their story continues to be overlooked. The recent failure of the campaign to erect a monument to the Transatlantic slave trade represented the issue: the campaign had failed to gain traction with HMG.

Duncan Wilson (DW) mentioned one idea, which was to accompany the listing of the CR plaque with more African-related listings such as the bust of Nelson Mandela on the South Bank. He was anxious this could be read cynically – LY agreed. DW was nervous about the case and did not want us to be forced into this case by:

Neil Mendoza (NM) supported listing. Charles O'Brien (CO'B) stated that listing needed to be dispassionate, rather than censorious: many houses of clear heritage merit (especially in Scotland) were built from the proceeds of the West India trade. Steve Trow said it was wrong to lose vestiges of our more awkward history: Germany regretted the wholesale destruction of the Berlin Wall. CO'B stressed the need to be really clear as to why it was listed, to rule out misunderstanding of our position. LY reminded the table there was no such thing as a dispassionate assessment: who could judge history? The listing last year of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern

No matter what we do about CR, a storm will come.

NM observed that some things come off the list, as well as go on. DW was ok about the statue of CR remaining on the Grade II* college building, but felt that the listing of the lesser plaque would not be understood by people. Rosemarie Macqueen (RM) asked how the full range of aspects of English history could be identified and how the many stories could be told. Paul Baker stressed the importance of interpretation: without a scheme of interpretation, the listing would appear troubling. LY agreed, and suggested getting an artist to respond and challenge the values of the CR plaque. We construct history: we need not be passive in so doing. MD recalled the issue of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, how it was used as a trigger for a new engagement with this aspect of history. LY suggested Yinka Shonibare as just the sort of person who could do this cleverly. RM has worked with Shonibare on several projects; the challenge was to tell the different stories of England.

Summing up, Laurie Magnus asked for the case to come back to Commission and HEAC. RB assured the meeting that the case would not be progressed until HE was happy with the approach: there was a straightforward way to complete the case, and there was a more thoughtful way which would draw on current conversations on how to present all aspects of our shared history.

Roger Bowdler

25 July 2016