HERITAGE AND THE MAKING OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: 
A STUDY OF MARGARET THATCHER’S BRITAIN

by

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Abstract

Britain during the 1980's experience a heritage boom. This was not something unique to Britain. The United States was experiencing the same phenomenon, as was Canada. Britain, however, is an interesting case study as it has a long history of preservation. Early movements shunned life characterized by industry and trade in favor of a mythical England; static, rural and idyllic. This mythical England was nationally appealing. By the 1980's however, Britain had lost much of its empire and was experiencing social, political and economic unrest. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 marked a radical departure for the heritage movement. With the New Right's focus on the industrial prowess of England, the heritage movement began to include a harmonized version of industrial history on their heritage roster. This thesis argues that the new inclusion of industrial sites under the umbrella of 'heritage' beginning in the 1980's enabled British history to be told in a more balanced way. I seek to understand how heritage came to reflect a new national narrative in the 1980's and what this new heritage, and indeed, new nation looked like.
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To Brian, my source of strength.
Britain in the 1980's experienced a heritage boom. Heritage critic Robert Hewison suggested in 1987 that "every week or so, somewhere in Britain, a new museum opens".\(^1\) This was not something unique to Britain. The United States was experiencing the same phenomenon, as was Canada.\(^2\) Britain, however, is an interesting case study as it has a long history of preservation. John Aubrey (1626-97) wrote the first British book dedicated to archaeological remains and he was followed closely by William Stukeley (1687-1765) who wrote extensively on the need to protect Stonehenge from "impending ruin".\(^3\) William Morris established the first preservationist organization in 1877. His Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was a national institution by 1920 and was soon followed by a plethora of other organizations, most notably the Georgian Group in 1937 and the Victorian Society in 1958. During the 1970's the role of pressure groups such as SAVE Britain's Heritage did much to elevate heritage issues to a national level, thereby propelling a new public awareness of the past. Historian Martin Weiner views the ethos of the early preservationist movement in Britain as aesthetic, but even more importantly, as a reaction against the chaos of modernity. He asserts,

Preservationism carried with it two intertwined attitudes that link the movement to broader currents in later-Victorian culture and society. First, a loss of confidence in the creative powers of one's contemporaries and an elevation of the past over the present; and second, a highly critical view of industrial capitalism and its 'materialistic' ethos. Many of those activities that roused the ire of preservationists were not in fact activities of restoration, but of modernization.\(^4\)

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2 A number of authors have written extensively on this in the *APT Bulletin* including: Gordon Fulton "Policy Issues and their Impact on Practice: Heritage Conservation in Canada" 29.3/4. 1998, 13-16.
Susan Bronson and Thomas Jester "Conserving the Built Heritage of the Modern Era: Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges" 28. 4. 1997, 4-12.
Early movements shunned life characterized by industry and trade in favor of a mythical England; static, rural and idyllic. This mythical England was nationally appealing. As a narrative, it was broad enough to unify all varieties of the political spectrum. Appealing to Conservatives, Imperialists and anti-Imperialists, Liberals and Radicals, preservation was 'patriotic' in a way industrialism never was. British heritage by the 1980's, then, was the result of a long and cumulative process of national mythmaking.

Heritage in the 1980's, however, experienced a radical departure from the preservation movements of the previous 100 years. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 was a decisive moment in the transformation of post-Imperial Britain. Campaigning for the leadership of the Conservative Party with the simple slogan "Britain has lost its way", Thatcher promised to reinvigorate commercial growth, break the stranglehold of the unions and privatize industries. Moreover, Thatcher promised that Britain would again become a leader in a new Europe and renegotiate its relationship with the United States, adhering to the primacy of British sovereignty. In short, Britain would again find its way after decades of decline following World War II. Central to Thatcher's vision was the role of national narrative, the power of memory and the harnessing of national heritage. But rather than glossing over the nation's industrial history, as early twentieth century conservationists had done, the Tory government managed to co-opt it – adeptly converting Frederick Engels and Alfred Toynbee's version of social catastrophe into "the great mythic pantheon of British history." Hailed as the British contribution to civilization, the Industrial Revolution was repackaged and sold to

5 Weiner, 55.
eager museum goers in an attempt by successive Thatcher governments to “promote wealth creation by a return to what are today believed to have been the attitudes and beliefs attendant upon the Industrial Revolution”. In the following sections, I want to outline the Thatcher reign, with all its controversy and internal pressure, and its resultant effect on national heritage through legislation and practice. I seek to understand how heritage came to reflect a new national narrative in the 1980’s and what this new heritage, and indeed, new nation looked like.

**National Identity**

National culture has been increasingly debated in academic disciplines. Many scholars argue that national identity is a social construct. It is pliable, subject to change, and a product of geographical, historical and cultural entities. Ryan Trimm (University of Rhode Island) has termed the rise of cultural iconography in the UK ‘national rebranding’. That is, the push during the Thatcher administration to recall British greatness through a cultural and social imagining is dependent on an idea of past greatness and inherited history. The stress on national heritage during the Thatcher years was a direct response to a loss of Empire and the economic malady that accompanied it.

**Deconstructing Heritage**

Heritage is a contested term. While there are a number of competing strands of thought, essentially the debate surrounding heritage concerns a) its wandering or itinerant nature and b) its rupture with history. The late Raphael Samuel asserted that heritage was

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7 Coleman, 34.
a vague, fluid and heterogeneous concept – one capable of obliging “wildly discrepant meanings”.

Heritage is more a reflection of a particular era, a set of social, political and cultural circumstances, if you will, than a concrete, easily definable entity. The National Heritage Act of 1983 itself does not attempt to define heritage, nor does English Heritage, the offspring of the 1983 Act, and yet by 1997 English Heritage was in possession of 408 properties, half a million objects and 13,000 boxes of archeological materials. According to Julius Bryant, Director of Museums and Collections, English Heritage’s collection “in time span, materials and geographic distribution…is as diverse as those of the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum”. He goes on to emphasize that “unlike national museums, English Heritage is not responsible for forming a definitive collection in a particular field.”

Thus, be it constructed or imposed, official or popular, heritage is subjective, dynamic, and often controversial. Hewison asserts:

I call it the ‘heritage industry’ not only because it is expected more and more to replace the real industry upon which this country’s economy depends. Instead of manufacturing goods, we are manufacturing a heritage, a commodity which nobody seems able to define, but which everybody is eager to sell.

For Hewison, heritage is more economic and less academic or substantive.

Hewison takes issue with the rupture between heritage and history and goes on to assert that “heritage, for all its seductive delights, is bogus history”. His interpretation of heritage is hardly novel. Debate surrounding the heritage movement is saturated with questions of authenticity. David Herbert, addressing the rosy picture increasingly put forward by heavily visited tourist sites, warns that “dangers arise because it is relatively

12 Hewison, 9.
13 Hewison, 144.
easy to invert history and to turn heritage into a marketable product without proper regard for rigor, honesty and factual accuracy in the presentation of heritage".\textsuperscript{14} David Lowenthal’s landmark book \textit{The Past is a Foreign Country} is dedicated to the increasing difficulty of interpreting the past; for Lowenthal, heritage sites reveal far more than what actually happened – they are a construct of our own creation; influenced heavily by manipulation, invention and forgetting. He states “by changing relics and records of former times, we change ourselves as well; the revised past in turn alters our own identity.”\textsuperscript{15} 

What is uncontested is the fact that heritage is a large part of contemporary popular culture and therefore a worthy subject of inquiry. As a site, heritage is the physical or symbolic manifestation of memory. For the purposes of this paper, heritage is constituted through the built environment and occasionally through symbolic landscapes. While there are authors who argue for a broader interpretation of heritage, for example, to include leisure, narrative, folklore etc., the purpose of this work is to explore institutional heritage as defined by organizations such as the National Trust and English Heritage.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} David Lowenthal \textit{The Past is a Foreign Country} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 411.

\textsuperscript{16} \textbf{The National Trust} was founded in 1895 by three Victorian philanthropists - Miss Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley. Currently the non-governmental organization cares for over 248,000 hectares (612,000 acres) of countryside in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, plus more than 700 miles of coastline and more than 200 buildings and gardens. The Trust is a registered charity and relies heavily on subscribing members (now numbering over 3.5 million) and other supporters.

\textbf{English Heritage} is the Government’s statutory adviser on the historic environment. Officially known as the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, English Heritage is an Executive Non-departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Its powers and responsibilities are set out in the National Heritage Act (1983) and reports to Parliament through the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. English Heritage is funded in part by the Government and in part from revenue earned from historic properties and other services. In 2005/06 public funding was worth £129 million, and income from other sources was £41.9 million.
Many historians have argued, and continue to argue, that the heritage movement of the late 20th century has by and large had an officially constructed right wing conservative agenda whose primary goal has been to unify the nation. At best, this is a simplistic view of reality that doesn’t really account for the complexities of a nation. The central question of this paper is: how did heritage contribute to the making of a new national identity in Britain during the 1980’s? It is my argument that heritage participates in the creation of what Benedict Anderson has termed ‘imagined communities’ – these communities rely on invented tradition and the construction of suitable national memory. Anderson suggests that nationalism or nation-ness is a cultural artifact, something with enormous emotional attachment and legitimacy. It is created through imagining one’s fellow citizen, as meeting all one’s contemporaries will never be possible. The nation is constituted through this ‘imagining’, this creating and inventing, and ultimately “the nation is...conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”. It is limited, has finite boundaries and outside it lie other nations – this too, a central tenet for defining the boundaries of in and out. The nation is also conceptualized as sovereign – as the idea of nation emerges through the Enlightenment period. This is the overall idea, the framework of ‘imagined community’, but there are very specific elements central to Anderson’s theory.

For Anderson, ‘imagined communities’ emerge as a result of the void left by failing dynastic rule and the demotion of religious language, notably Latin. New vernacular language, science and the simultaneity of time (calendrical coincidence) result in the creation of an imaginative homogeneous space. Anderson asserts, “An American

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18 Anderson, 7.
will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his...fellow Americans...but he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity”19. Heritage sites, with their ritual visitation patterns and extensive media coverage, function as physical carriers of national narratives. They too, arise out the void left by religion and monarchy (many heritage sites in fact exist specifically to recreate historical monarchical or religious circumstance – think briefly of the symbolism inherent in Westminster Abbey and Windsor Castle). While not specifically referring to Britain, Anderson speaks generally about the behavior of imperial governments and their ‘historical maps’ in relation to overseas colonies. Note the centrality of geographical designation, of human and historical space in the following excerpt:

It is noticeable how heavily concentrated archaeological efforts were on the restoration of imposing monuments (and how these monuments began to be plotted on maps for public distribution and edification...colonial regimes began attaching themselves to antiquity as much as conquest...More and more Europeans were being born in Southeast Asia, and being tempted to make it their home. Monumental archaeology, increasingly linked to tourism, allowed the state to appear as the guardian of a generalized, but also local Tradition.20

This ‘mapping’ of heritage not only continued but intensified throughout the twentieth century and is accompanied in the recent past by a massive production of literature and a plethora of media coverage. Guide books, maps, websites, historical channels, editorials, promotional advertising and picture books litter the country, indeed the world, with visual confirmation of concrete, tangible historical monuments easily located on a map and served daily by hoards of buses, boats and bicycles. For Anderson, this print culture is fundamentally linked to the rise of the ‘imagined community’. The heritage movement of the late twentieth century is absolutely engaged in a very similar fashioning of the national.

19 Anderson, 26.
20 Anderson, 180-181.
Constructing Memory and Inventing Tradition

In the case of Britain, I argue that these communities are largely based on constructed memories and 'invented traditions'. Through commercialization and propaganda, the heritage movement is able to offer a visual narrative, easily reproduced through literature and the media, which engages in the creation and continuity of memory. Historical architecture, or more precisely, that architecture which is emphasized, continually attracts visitors to notable sites of memory, thereby creating what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have termed 'invented traditions', "...a set of practices...of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past." 21

Heritage is largely contingent on the construction of memory. Pierre Nora asserts, "modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image." 22 There has been a tremendous amount written on the overlap of geography and memory: the site, the building, the landscape and the narrative that accompanies it. The constitutive power of space is enormous – one only needs to think of the Vatican or Auchwitz to fully realize the magnitude of mythology and idea, of history and horror and its rootedness in

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geographical space. Edward Said understands ‘geography’ not as an impersonal point on a map but “as a socially constructed and maintained sense of place”.23 The role of heritage through the tangible, the artifact, the trace is central to the making and remaking of national narrative, and exploration of how this narrative reaches the populous is important.

Extremely powerful in one’s daily existence, memory is a lens through which to view public consciousness and examine public action (or the lack of it). Memory is a forum through which national narratives have intense meaning, where we can dissect the message and fundamentally begin to understand and often expose the calculated strategies of elite propaganda, or so Hewison and a host of others would argue – although this author would argue the reality of memory creation is far more complex than that.

But what is memory? While much has been written on the topic, many historians tend to assume we are all working under the same assumptions about what constitutes memory. Lowenthal is perhaps most explicit in defining memory and his discussion of memory will form the basis for this essay. Lowenthal is arguably the pioneer of memory studies. Previous discussion of memory was part of the realm of psychology – what Lowenthal was able to do was to move beyond the individual and understand the particular as part of the whole. It is precisely the ability to collectivize memory that has made it so meaningful in the construction of national identity. For Lowenthal “the remembered past is both individual and collective. But as a form of awareness, memory is wholly and intensely personal; it is always felt as ‘some particular event [that] happened to me’...memory ... converts public events into idiosyncratic personal

experiences." Key here is the movement from the individual to the collective in Lowenthal’s definition; he has clearly and successfully melded the two together, and for him, any discussion of memory necessarily includes individual memory as part of a larger collective process - the public consciousness is not separate from individual memory.

But memory, and by memory historians generally refer to collective, public or social memory, is often influenced by a number of other factors, notably tradition and nostalgia. More succinctly perhaps, memory is often distorted by these factors. John Tosh asserts,

All groups have a sense of the past, but they tend to use it to reinforce their own beliefs and sense of identity. Like human memory, collective or social memory can be faulty, distorted by factors such as a sense of tradition or nostalgia, or else a belief in progress through time. Modern professional historians take their cue from nineteenth-century historicism, which taught that the past should be studied on its own terms, ‘as it actually was’. However this more detached approach to the past can put historians in conflict with people who feel their cherished versions of the past are under threat.²²

Tosh’s excerpt brings up two fundamental and related issues in memory studies: distortion and the gap between public memory and professional history (the latter we have already discussed above in relation to heritage). Distortion in social or collective memory is a result of the reliance on and exploitation of tradition and nostalgia. Throughout the late 1980’s and 1990’s a tremendous amount of scholarship was written on these two concepts. ‘Invented traditions’ are practices which have been used, largely by authorities, as instruments of rule in communities where bonds of family, village, and religion are steadily disappearing. Nineteenth century liberal ideology had purposely pitted itself against tradition and in doing so created vast voids in which new ‘traditions’ were formed. Whereas religion had previously been the central carrier of memory, the

twentieth century sought to fill the void with new, largely invented traditions. The result has been that the last 70 years have witnessed an astonishing rise in events, sites, and commemorations which help contribute to a consciously constructed sense of popular memory: public royal birthday celebrations, May Day events, processions, bands, festival pavilions and parades, to name a very few. Nostalgia is central to this conscious use of tradition. Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw asserts,

Nostalgia is experienced when some elements of the present are felt to be defective and when there is no public sense of redeemability through a belief in progress...some cultural critics have identified the whole experience of postmodernity as a kind of macro-nostalgia. There is no space which we authentically occupy, and so popular culture fills the gap by manufacturing images of home and rootedness... 26

Heritage sites are fertile ground for the mingling of invented traditions with feelings of nostalgia; both of which are fundamental elements in the building of a collective memory – and memory is a necessary component of nation building.

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The 1980’s

Thatcher’s government, responsible for passing significant heritage legislation and radically transforming the content and interpretation of history, was continually engaged in a tug of war between differing versions of conservatism. Moreover, pressure groups and lobbyists wielded an enormous amount of power in the debate over the historical landscape; what should be saved, what shouldn’t be saved. So, to assume homogeneity in the political and social landscape is to drastically misrepresent reality. One needs to explore the role of memory and heritage as part of a vast network, one which can and often does intrinsically contain conflict. We then may be better equipped to understand the performance of memory over time. Through a belief in the primacy and evidence of networks, an alternative approach to memory studies might illuminate the shortcomings of ideological, political and class-based critiques of public memory and explore new ways to assess the development of heritage, myth and message in both contemporary and historical society. Because power can and does exist in numerous entities and forms, the nature of power is a fundamental part of any network. This is emblematic of the continuing tug of war over what did and did not constitute heritage in England during the late twentieth century.

There was a considerable dialectic occurring in Britain during the Tory reign and the heritage movement of that era was a reflection of that tension. Ironically, and quite in contrast to the assertions put forth by critics such as Hewison, the result of the 1980’s dialectic was that heritage by the 1990’s arguably reflected a more balanced view of British society over the ages. Rather than simply reflecting a rural idyll - reverence for the country house, home of stone villages, pasture and cottage craft - heritage by the end
of Thatcher’s reign also celebrated the glory of industrialization and its accompanying empire. The new veneration of an historic industrial Britain was a key component in the making of a new national identity.

Yet, for all the historiography that emerged in the 1980’s surrounding memory, there is relatively little that addresses the dialectic of the Tory party. The genre of memory and heritage studies is largely occupied by left leaning critics who assert that modern heritage is saturated with right wing interpretations of reality – presentist in nature with an eye towards nation building and the imposition of an official and often conservative agenda. This pervasiveness of ideology obscures much of the larger picture. Assuming that heritage and memory are constructed from above assumes a particular view of the way society works. Similarly, asserting memory is a bottom-up process also assumes society works in a fundamental way – albeit a more palatable way. But again, these views seem simplistic (and they constitute the bulk of work on memory studies to date) and it is unclear whether these models really represent the social and political world. A closer look at the Thatcher era reveals a much more complex reality.

*The Dialectic*

In 1987 Dennis Kavanagh wrote a book entitled *Thatcherism and British Politics: the End of Consensus*, its main thesis being that the general political consensus that had prevailed during the 1950’s and 1960’s was increasingly disappearing by the late 1970’s due to inflation, poor economic performance, a growth in the power of trade unions and a weak government. For Kavanagh, the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher signaled its final end – in her election campaign Thatcher was hardly secretive of her disdain for the “old clubbable consensus” and saw herself as the stimulus for new political direction and
for change.27 On January 31, 1985 Liberal leader David Steel spoke of Margaret Thatcher to the House of Commons and had this to say:

I believe in the politics of persuasion, while she believes in confrontation. We believe in building a consensus.28

Heather Nunn, writing in retrospect, addresses the image of Thatcher throughout the years she was in power. By analyzing speeches, photos, interviews and biographies, Nunn concludes Thatcher was “a woman encountering opposition, danger, and hostility on a number of levels: personal, party, doctrinal, civil, national, international”29 From the beginning of her leadership, Thatcher’s persona was a sharp contrast to the recent traditional Conservative past. Nunn continues: “she was presented as being at permanent war with political stagnation, national complacency, dependency on the Welfare State, official bureaucracy and also social insurrection and international threat”.30 In a comprehensive article on British conservatism in the twentieth century (1987) John Fair outlines Thatcher’s break with Keynesian economics and her commitment to monetarist economic policies and says of her leadership of the party: “the importance of this change in leadership in the Conservatives’ emerging ideological tradition cannot be understated”.31 Thatcher in her own memoirs clearly outlines her rupture with party tradition and squarely confronts the considerable tension that existed between her and other party members known as the ‘wets’. Discussing a loss of public confidence in Tory economic strategy by the end of 1980 Thatcher asserts

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28 Kavanagh 6.
30 Nunn, 13.
The very last thing I could afford was well-publicized dissent from within the Cabinet itself. Yet this was what I now had to face. Public dissent from the ‘wets’ was phrased in what was obviously intended to be a highly sophisticated code, in which each phrase had a half-hidden meaning and philosophical abstractions were woven together to condemn practical policies by innuendo. This cloaked and indirect approach has never been my style and I felt contempt for it. I thrive on honest arguments...I prefer to debate my opponents rather than to undermine them with leaks.22

Without consensus it is unlikely there existed one cohesive right wing message or that cultural transmission could behave in a top down fashion - its message originating at the top and eventually trickling down to the masses through programmed narratives of nation-ness. The state is considerably more heterogeneous than heritage critics have tended to assert.

The rupture between Thatcher and the party ‘wets’, however, is hardly a new historical interpretation of the 1980’s. It is well documented and highly discussed throughout the decade. More nuanced is the impact of this New Right ideology on cultural matters. Thatcherism contributed to the making of a new heritage – one that reflected a national commitment to free enterprise, the eradication of state intervention and a clear delineation between the new right and socialism. Stuart Hall in 1983 asserted that Thatcher’s ideology was a product of economic and social crisis that had plagued the country throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s. Hall asserts that Thatcher destroyed the “old landmarks – full employment, welfare state support, equality of opportunity, the ‘caring society’, neo-Keynesian economic management, corporatist incomes policies”. He goes on:

In their place a new public philosophy has been constructed, rooted in the open affirmation of ‘free market values’- the market as the measure of everything – and reactionary ‘Victorian’ social values – patriarchalism, racism and imperialist nostalgia.33

33 Fair, 573.
It is unlikely that Thatcher would define Victorian values as patriarchal or racist— but still, there is some element of truth in Hall’s statement. In her own memoir Thatcher states,

I had great regard for the Victorians for many reasons—not least their civic spirit to which the increase in voluntary and charitable societies and the great buildings and endowments of our cities pay eloquent tribute. I never felt uneasy about praising ‘Victorian values’ or—the phrase I originally used—‘Victorian virtues’.

Thatcher was more concerned with hard work and thrift than she was with patriarchy or racism—and in fact deplored the tradition of male dominance, referring to it extensively throughout her writing: “there are...certain kinds of men who simply cannot abide working for a woman”, or “my experience is that a number of the men I have dealt with in politics demonstrate precisely those characteristics which they attribute to women—vanity and an inability to make tough decisions”, or “if a woman asks no special privileges and expects to be judged solely by what she is and does, this is found gravely and unforgivably disorientating”. Thus, for Thatcher, Victorian values had a very specific connotation—hard work, self-dependency, industrialism—it is precisely this new public philosophy, as Hall puts it, this commitment to ‘Victorian virtues’ that is important to the discussion of heritage.

Thatcher’s public philosophy, however, had one overarching goal—to give national pride back to a country battered by hard times. Speaking of her decision to enter the Falklands War she asserts that “we were defending our honor as a nation...the significance of the Falklands was enormous, both for Britain’s self-confidence and for our standing in the world”. Speaking about America and the administration of Ronald

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34 Thatcher 627.
35 Thatcher 129.
36 Thatcher 173.
Reagan, Thatcher noted, “they shared our values...an intense patriotism”.\(^{37}\) Throughout her time in power Thatcher was intensely conscious of Britain’s reputation on the world stage, her memoir infused with photographs of summit meetings, international tours, and state dinners. All this gave confidence to the populace - it harkened nostalgia for an imperial by-gone era – and this philosophy was ultimately communicated and interpreted throughout the historical landscape.\(^{38}\)

**The Heritage Movement**

While economics may have been the uncontested underpinning of the Tory cabinet during the 1980’s, they were emphatically linked to culture and international stature. I do not want to suggest that Thatcher’s own version of culture supplanted what had already existed in Britain in the post war era; merely that the Thatcher era significantly contributed to, and altered, the course of the heritage movement and that this new course had a new, although often contested, national vision. The arts could contribute to the making of a new national identity. Thatcher herself said:

I was profoundly conscious of how a country’s art collections, museums, libraries, operas and orchestras combine with its architecture and monuments to magnify its international standing...the public manifestation of a nation’s culture is as much a demonstration of its qualities as the size of its GDP is of its energies. Consequently, it mattered to me that culturally as well as economically Britain should be able to hold its head up in comparison with the United States and Europe.\(^{39}\)

British nationalism during the 1980’s rested heavily on international image. The Falklands war was more about posturing, about showing a brave, strong, united Britain, than it was about ‘saving’ islands from the Argentines. This national projection is important as it forms the basis of a new British national identity after 1980 and it cannot

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\(^{37}\) Thatcher 298.

\(^{38}\) By “historical landscape” I refer to heritage sites, buildings, monuments etc.

\(^{39}\) Thatcher, 632.
be segregated from the internal national culture that was so rapidly being developed through heritage and historical narrative at precisely the same time.

Perhaps the most far reaching effect Thatcher’s government had on heritage was through legislation. In 1980 the government passed the National Heritage Act (1980) and created the National Heritage Memorial Fund. This Fund had as its mandate “[to obtain] grants to help acquire, maintain or preserve any land, building or structure, or any object or collection which is of outstanding scenic, historic, aesthetic, architectural, scientific, or artistic interest.”40 The memorial fund often acted as a depository for willed property in lieu of paying capital transfer taxes or estate duties. Following decades of socialist taxation policy, this heritage legislation was an important step in a new right national vision. The 1980 act was followed in 1983 by a more comprehensive National Heritage Act which dissolved the Ancient Monuments Board and the Historic Buildings Council and created English Heritage – a new organization to act as the government’s statutory advisor on the historic environment. English Heritage operates as an executive, non-departmental public body and is sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, through which it reports to Parliament.

Yet, heritage preservation had a dichotomous nature – although it often relied heavily on government coffers, it could, if structured correctly, generate significant revenue of its own. Above all, the Tory government was committed to private (not public) ownership and heritage sites were increasingly expected to pay their way – imposing entrance fees and encouraging events and leisure activities around their sites. Yet, for all the criticism of government cutbacks, there was actually a sharp increase in

40 Website, National Heritage Memorial Fund.
funding to the arts while Thatcher was in power. The rise in heritage and its enormously successful offspring, tourism, provided a welcome relief to an economy long suffering from unemployment and empty architecture. In 1989 Angus Buchanan, attempting to silence critics of the modern heritage movement such as Robert Hewison, asserted that the rise in heritage preservation was something the country should be grateful for:

In a society which has lost much of its manufacturing industry, heritage provides a welcome resource in generating an industry through visitors both from home and overseas. The heritage industry...has developed at a time when it has been able to fill a void in the balance of payments, provide much needed employment in depressed areas, and regenerate self-esteem and enterprise amongst communities which had lost both.

Tourism created ritual, repetitive visits to designated heritage sites. English Heritage routinely published advertisements in popular based newspapers in an effort to boost the visibility of its sites while appealing to the citizen traveler. Catchy headlines such as “this summer, get away from the 20th century” or “do you believe in ghosts?” routinely dotted The Times newspaper. In addition, English Heritage published extensive historical guidebooks to not only their heritage sites, but on time periods such as Industrial England, subjects such as Castles, and Roman Forts, key towns such as Canterbury and symbolic landscapes. The constant bombardment of heritage throughout the media prompted Roy Strong, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in 1983 to state that “hysteria about...heritage is a permanent media feature.”

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41 Thatcher, 633.
pervasive heritage, as it played out through national media sources, was a significant contribution to not only the national imagination but was also central to a new national scripting.

All this is not to say there were not significant debates over what constituted heritage and what did not. To be sure, Thatcher’s New Right had a specific vision of national stewardship, but there were always pressure groups, opposition MP’s and financial strains which acted as a restraint on pure unadulterated right wing mythmaking. The following diagram is illustrative of the competing interests involved in the creation of a new heritage site:
Figure 1.1: Overview Illustrating the Heterogeneity of the State and Its Effect on the National Historical Landscape

Repetitive Tourism and Media Coverage
Invented Tradition – Collective Memory
Result:
Imagined Community
NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY
During the 1980’s, the heritage movement was engaged in a continual tug of war. Its construction, meaning, and public portrayal was not only important for historical memory and tourism – it was also a matter of national prestige. But heritage during the decade increasingly became multifaceted: it began to house deeper, more complex layers. No longer was the heritage landscape primarily dotted with castles and country homes, the New Right began to develop a radically new emphasis: that of industrial celebration. In the early 1980’s historian Martin Weiner had this to say of the industrial legacy:

Industrialism had of course been born in England; there was no wishing that fact away. But the legitimacy of that birth could be denied: Industrialism and the industrial spirit could be seen as not truly English, and indeed, as a profound menace to the survival of “Englishness”. A cultural polarity gradually emerged between Englishness, identified with the pastoral vision (the “green and pleasant land”), and industrialism (the “dark satanic mills”).

But no sooner had Weiner written his polemic then things quickly began to change. The Thatcherite commitment to, indeed its celebration of, Victorian values – those attitudes and ideas that were so prevalent throughout the industrial era – began to influence historical memory. There was a new national narrative stressed by Margaret Thatcher and her government. Rather than celebrating a pastoral, idyllic and largely rural England, the Tories celebrated the glory of the Industrial Revolution. It was industrialization that made Britain strong, imperial, an empire to be reckoned with. It was socialism that had made the country weak with nationalized industry, powerful labour unions and international blunders.

The heritage movement seized this rhetoric and refocused its attention on industrial architecture. From the mid to late 1980’s industrialism was celebrated for the first time. More significantly, industrial architecture was hailed as distinctly English in design. UNESCO asserted that the mills of northern England “…are particularly British,

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owing little to other cultures."\(^{47}\) Margaret Thatcher and the Tories harnessed the history of the Industrial Revolution and designated its built sites – its factories and towns – heritage sites. They became an integral part of a national narrative; intensely visual, emotional, and harmonized. D.C. Coleman asserts, “as the country’s decline in manufacturing competitiveness accelerated as hundreds of old industrial plants came to a stop…nostalgia took them, or at any rate some of them, into her welcoming arms. The relics of Britain’s industrial past were transformed into tourist shrines."\(^{48}\)

The model industrial town of Saltaire in the West Riding of Yorkshire was a recipient of this tide of industrial celebration, ultimately being designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001. Built between 1850 and 1875 by textile entrepreneur and factory owner Titus Salt, the planned town was centered around a vast textile mill. Complete with housing for five thousand workers, a church, a village green, a school, an infirmary, bathhouses, almshouses and a leisure club, Saltaire was conveniently located three miles from the industrial town of Bradford on the river Aire.

From its inception, Saltaire was hailed a ‘model village’, by industrialists, government officials and a variety of townspeople. Between 1850 and the 1880’s little about Saltaire was publicly criticized. In 1871 Alexander Redgrave, a factory inspector, visited Salts Mill and reported:

Not only is there one of the finest and I believe longest work-rooms of the kind in the world, but the factory is made the centre around which a complete colony lives and thrives.\(^{49}\)

\(^{47}\) UNESCO, Saltaire, 6.
Redgrave went on to praise the surrounding town built by Salt. He applauded its well built houses, planned city streets and designated parks. Others likened the factory to a “strong baronial castle of feudal times”, a regal institution around which houses were clustered, and more importantly, protected and supported by a noble master.50 There was a strong undercurrent that orderly paternalism was completely, and for the first time, compatible with industrial success. With his factory and village, Salt had improved labor relations, was a “model master”, and was morally successful.

In the initial decades following the factory’s completion there were also strong references to the technological superiority of Salts Mill and to the astonishing vastness of the building. On February 1, 1860, The Times ran an article on Saltaire emphasizing the “gigantic size of the establishment”. It cited the mill as

A fine substantial piece of work, fireproof, and highly creditable to Messrs. Lockwood and Mawson, the architects – (it) extends 550 ft. long and 72 ft. high; and, as the top story runs over the central archway and reaches the whole length of the mill, we get a room 550 ft. in length – the longest perhaps, in Europe.

Extensive attention was also given to the mill’s output, comparing the length of fabric produced in a year and a half by 1,200 power looms to the circumference of the globe.51

By the 1880’s, however, the previous praise for Saltaire and its attendant architecture began to cool. Observations of the village and its mill in the latter decades of the century were laden with a more critical tone. The previous praise for Salts Mill waned and the discussion turned away from industrial factory architecture to that of public housing. This was the dawning of a new era – one more concerned with social experimentation than industrial prowess. As new co-operative projects such as the

50 Reynolds, 282-283.
51 The Times, Saltaire, Feb. 1, 1860, 7.
French village of Guise emerged less and less was said of Salts Mill and attention was
turned to the housing arrangement of Saltaire - often criticized as being “dismal and
cramped” in comparison to newer projects. In 1864 John Ruskin was in Bradford and
satirically spoke of the mill owner’s ideal version of human life:

At the bottom of the hill is to be the mill; not less than a quarter of a mile long, with one steam
engine at each end, and two in the middle and a chimney three hundred feet high. In this mill are
to be in constant employment from eight hundred to a thousand workers, who never drink, never
strike, always go to church on Sunday and always express themselves in a respectful language.

By the late century, the paternalistic nature of Saltaire and Salts Mill was viewed less as
philanthropy and more as oppressive and controlling.

Perhaps what marked the early twentieth century discourse surrounding Salts Mill
was its noticeable absence. Newspaper references were confined to discussion of the
company’s financial information – there weren’t any references to the architecture of
either the mill or the town. It seemed, by all accounts, to have fallen off the map. In
1951 The Economic History Review briefly referred to the decay of Saltaire in an article
on British industrial villages of the nineteenth century. Salts Mill only received a
modicum of attention in the article’s discussion of the factory canteen “which sold meat
for 2d., soup for 1d., tea or coffee for ½ d., and offered free cooking and accommodation
to workpeople who preferred to bring their own food.” Because of its reliance on one
patron, Saltaire and its mill were cited as failed models of industrial planning. By the
mid twentieth century the town seemed destined for demolition.

52 Reynolds, 285.
53 Reynolds, 284.
54 W. Ashworth “British Industrial Villages in the Nineteenth Century” The Economic History Review,
New Series, 3.3. 1951, 380.
The 1980’s, however, marked a radical departure in the heritage movement. In 1986 Peyton Skipwith, Director of The Fine Art Society in London, stressed the importance and urgency of protecting Salts Mill. He states:

Worrying is the future of the vast Italianate mill...which is now lying empty. Saltaire holds a vital place at the center of the history of planning in the whole industrialized world, and until the future of this vast sandstone palace is assured, a threat hangs over the very existence of one of the greatest monuments of the Industrial Revolution.55

It was not uncommon in the 1980’s to hear the architecture of Salts Mill compared to the architecture of ancient Rome and the classical era. The mill was elevated to prominence in this new national narrative and there was a flurry of literary activity surrounding its preservation. Heritagists compared it to architectural icons – “it was...modeled on Osborne House, Queen Victoria’s residence on the Isle of Wight” and “(it) was equal in length to St. Paul’s Cathedral” or “the 25-foot-high mill chimney was designed to look like the campanile of an Italian church”.56 The heritage movement has squarely centered the history of Salts Mill into its larger national and indeed international agenda. It was an integral part of a validated and restored history of Britain.

In summary, Saltaire can be viewed as a case study for the historiography surrounding the industrial revolution. Initially hailed a model village complete with vast technical and architectural superiority, as the tide of public opinion began to turn against the pervasiveness of industrialism in England Salt’s village and mill became increasingly criticized by the likes of Ruskin. The age of industrial prowess and legitimacy was silenced. Relatively little was said of the mill during the first three quarters of the twentieth century as Britain was preoccupied with two world wars, the loss of overseas

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colonies in the late 1940's, a devalued pound in the 1960's, inflation, unemployment and near total economic collapse in the 1970's. The mill and town at Saltaire gradually fell into disrepair while England desperately celebrated a very different type of historical heritage, that of rural idyll and country living. Little was said of industrial greatness; it being a dark stain on a glorious imperial history. Not until the 1980's was the image of industrial England repackaged for public consumption. The rejuvenation of Salts Mill and Saltaire reflected a new, national, Tory driven memory – it embodied a celebration of Victorian values and the merits of industrialization; its critics were, effectively, silenced.

Saltaire was only one of the many industrial sites that became part of the heritage landscape in the 1980's. There was intense lobbying from former industrial cities to be included on the roster of new heritage sites. C.F. Hawke-Smith, Chairman of the Staffordshire Historic Buildings Trust, wrote with urgency to The Times newspaper in 1982: “I write from a city that has a unique legacy of Victorian industrial and associated buildings. Exceptionally, a complete survey of every surviving structure from before World War I was launched by the city council this year. This has brought home the level of destruction. At the present rate little or nothing of the fabric of this major 19th century conurbation will remain by 2000AD…unlike Bath or York, the great manufacturing towns are virtually written off.”

There was a flurry of industrial archeology during the decade and an emphasis on re-enactment - on museums that aimed to recreate the industrial age. This new vernacular history was evident in the many industrial museums that opened their doors during the 1980's.

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58 See Appendix 1.
Yet while industrial archeology began to dominate the heritage agenda during the 1980’s there also remained a strong lobby to preserve country homes and landscapes. The heritage industry became more complex, more multifaceted, and in many ways, more balanced. Here it may be useful to get case specific. In the budget speech of 1984 Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced that the Treasury would give the National Heritage Memorial Fund 4.5 million pounds sterling with which to save Calke Abbey, a derelict country house. This was not only unprecedented for the Tories but is illustrative of the heterogeneity of political decisions. The announced rescue of Calke followed a very public and intense campaign by heritagists, most notably lobby group SAVE Britain’s Heritage who issued a lightening leaflet entitled “This magical house must be saved intact. Now!” The group successfully appealed to the public through newspaper editorials, pamphlets, parliamentary debates, and the National Trust. M.P. Edwina Currie in a letter to the editor of the Times newspaper in 1983 argued “it is highly unlikely that such a prize will come up again in this way.”59 Hugh Clayton, also in the Times, reported “the estate, with its mansion of richly-filled rooms untouched since Victorian times, [is] worth saving for the nation”.60 The debate over Calke Abbey was apocalyptic and appealed to a public fearful of losing a little piece of England. Calke itself was an architecturally unimpressive house built in the 1700’s by an unknown architect. It was hardly the type of building the New Right would have saved had they had the choice. Yet, as the volume of the lobby increased, supported by the National Trust and various party ‘wets’, Thatcher’s government had little to do but acquiesce. The contents of the historic house, however, provided some relief for the New Right agenda.

59 Edwina Currie “Calke Abbey” The Times, Monday, December 5, 1983.
As every dark cloud has a silver lining, Calke’s collection could be used to further a Thatcherite construction of national narrative.

For the New Right, the contents of Calke Abbey afforded it a new status – no longer was Calke simply an architecturally uninspired shabby country house, it was also a museum housing imperial objects – along with these objects came a hefty dose of historical nostalgia. Israel Shenker outlined some of the collected objects in the following excerpt: “There are lovely silk garments, books of dried flowers, Victorian dolls and photograph albums, and German toy soldiers patiently awaiting demobilization. A barrel organ is ready to strike up a tune, and one bookcase conceals a 1761 mandolin…in the stable are coaches and gigs and pony traps, a cart for carrying coffins and another – bearing a well-preserved Victoria fire engine ready to be drawn by horses. Ornate saddles, stirrups, riding crops and harnesses hand in place”.61 Patrick Wright argued that Calke represented “a little Piece of England”; a private house full of domestic collections.62 In Parliament, Lord Strabolgi stated “Calke Abbey [is] an important part of the country’s heritage. The contents [have] remained untouched and virtually unchanged for well over 100 years. It [is] a good example of what the interior of a great country house was like in the last century”.63 Lord Gibson further asserted the contents were “extraordinary”.64 Calke Abbey was a landscape of historical objects – none of which were particularly impressive in isolation – but taken as a whole, the house and its extensive collections became a pseudo-museum, or more importantly, a window into a

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61 Israel Shenker “In this Stately Pile, the Sublime and Ridiculous Coexist” Smithsonian 16 (July 1985), 3.
64 Ibid.
bygone era – a static and impressive reminder of imperial England. And historical narrative was very important to conservatives during the early 1980’s.

Calke Abbey is a useful case study. It poignantly illustrates the heterogeneity of a nation and is a powerful example of how heritage sites are integral in the creation of collective memory and ‘imagined community’ – their past, present and future extensively covered through popular media sources such as newspapers, National Trust publications, and magazines. But Calke was much more than a country house in need of saving; and this could be said for many heritage sites added to the roster during the 1980’s. Calke was a metaphor for a country in decline, a country that itself needed saving. The post-war years had witnessed massive socio-economic turmoil. The end of empire weighed heavily on a country that had ‘lost its way’. The new Tory narrative of the 1980’s needed to employ a ‘double-coded’ rhetoric to right its path. On the one hand, Thatcherism urged a return to Victorian values – hard work, thrift, patriotism, tradition – yet on the other hand there was a commitment to commercial democracy and to an enterprise ideology. Calke, with its endless museum-like collections and its country house persona, fitted well into this narrative. It embodied three ideas central to the Tory agenda. First, its saving represented a defeat of socialism and the wealth tax. Secondly, it provided a democratization of heritage, and more importantly was a “shrine to commodity culture, symbolic of a political-economic egalitarianism – Everyman as consumer”.65 Finally, its existence solidified a nostalgic link with a constructed past – that of a stable, secure England; an essential England – a state of being that could once again be possible under a Tory regime. Calke Abbey was an integral part of a larger machine and as such was

65 Behmer, 201.
central to creating a more balanced national heritage. What is important here, however, is the realization that heritage is a fluid concept; it changes over time and its use more often than not reflects a particular social, political or economic milieu. Calke Abbey was an ordinary, uninspired house heaped to the rafters with unwanted objects – the construction of Calke Abbey through the media and government dialogue was something very different. As a site of memory, Calke Abbey symbolized a national conservative revival – one with a very new face – and was therefore too important not to save.

The effect of this new combined heritage was two-fold. First, heritage legislation and public debate over historical architecture in the 1980's resulted in a powerful imagined community. Media coverage, repetitive visits, and the elevation of English Heritage and the National Trust to prominent national tourist institutions enabled a country to envision itself as a community – one able to participate in a shared memory. This narrative relied heavily on the role of invented traditions. The adding of layers, the celebration of industrialism alongside country houses, resulted in a richer historical landscape and a widening of historical interpretation. Finally, through this imagined community – its constructed memory and adherence to tradition – came a new national narrative. The move from rural idyll to the celebration of a new powerful Britain was reflected through the role and emphasis on industrial glory and political and economic imperialism. Thatcher was a populist. Her commitment to democratic principles, to referendums and direct public communication, contributed a new national vision devoid of the elitism and class consciousness that had historically preoccupied many members of the Conservative Party.
Conclusion

Britain during the 1980's experienced a heritage boom. This new wave of heritage celebration departed significantly from the heritage movement of the past. Heritage after 1980 began to include industrial sites – cities and factories – in a reflection of a new Tory driven national vision. This 'New Right' centered in Thatcherite ideals of free enterprise and a commitment to Victorian virtues, altered the national narrative of a country previously concerned more with rural idyll and imperial splendor. This new historical awakening was able to effectively construct a broad national memory through increased local and national tourism; more succinctly by encouraging repetitive visitation to heritage sites coupled with the passage of significant legislation such as the 1980 and 1983 National Heritage Acts which supported new comprehensive heritage initiatives.

All this is not to assert there was a controlling right wing agenda as it related to heritage. Quite in contrast, heritage during the 1980's reflected the dialectic of the governing apparatus of the state. As a result, heritage was continually engaged in a tug-of-war between competing interests: 'wets', the New Right and lobby groups. Consequently, national heritage came to be a more comprehensive and balanced historical interpretation – it reflected a heterogeneous nation searching for a new national and international face after decades of economic, political, social and international decline. Heritage, as an enormous part of popular culture, is a lens through which the historian can better comprehend the making of national identity in the late twentieth century.
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