Annual report

Thank you for coming to the first AGM of World Heritage UK.

It has been quite a journey from when, as the LAWHF committee, we sat around the table in Telford and Wrekin Council, with the late Cllr David Davis presiding, wondering how we would reinvigorate the collective energies of the UK’s World Heritage Site Sites.

We first contracted an external consultant to give us an objective view on what to do. John Keiffer suggested that we set up as an independent charity, so on consultation with the membership we followed that line and took a step into the relative unknown.

A period of consultation and reflection followed, with culminated in the agreement at the 2014 LAWHF AGM at Portcullis House to dissolve LAWHF and constitute World Heritage UK as a new charitable organisation. Nine members had put themselves forward to be a ‘shadow’ board – not as sinister as it sounds – and on Sept 1st 2015, World Heritage UK was born.

Since then it has been non-stop. Chris Mahon has been with us on a part time contract as Development Director since July 2015, and immersed himself thoroughly within the sometimes baffling but always interesting world of World Heritage, and very ably helped us to meet our three strategic Aims around Advocacy, Networking and Promotion.

After a well-attended ‘test’ event in Liverpool in March, supported by Historic England, we took the decision in mid-2015 to risk holding the first national UK World heritage conference for as long as anyone could remember. Saltaire was to be the venue, with the event taking place firmly within the World Heritage Site itself. It was memorable for the quality of the presentations, the interactions, the hardness of the chairs, and the warmth of the welcome from the good denizens of Bradford, whether in ceremonial chain, or serving bhajis. More than 90 delegates did come, and enjoyed the event very much and our thanks particularly must go to Helen Thornton as ‘the’ local organising committee!

Between the fist and second conferences we have held a number of other meetings. The first was a technical event about Management Planning in January. Hosted by Historic Environment Scotland in Edinburgh, and involving a memorable Burns night supper, the meeting started to help Site staff answer questions about the thorny issue of writing an effective management plan in the context of changing rules and disappearing fund. The workshop was attended by more than 50 people, including a sizeable European contingent, and our thanks go particularly to HES for their support.
The summer networking meeting was set in the enviable setting of Giants causeway, and involved a tour, presentations, some strategic planning and even a surprise visit from the queen. Our thanks go to Max Bryant and his National Trust team for this event. We were also pleased to have an event hosted by ALVA at the Tower of London during the summer – it involved a useful introduction to the Discover England Fund amongst other presentations.

The feedback from all of the events has been overwhelmingly positive, and we are trying to improve where we can, and listen to our membership. We are also delighted to say that as of today we have had meetings in all four home nations in our first full year of operation, emphasising our commitment to all of the UK’s World Heritage Sites; I am not sure whether we will be able to justify a trip to one of the overseas territories, but if anyone knows Richard Branson...? Although this current event will be reported in next year’s report, I wish to give a huge vote of thanks now to Cadw, Gwynedd Council, and the local World Heritage Steering Group for being such fantastic hosts, and Laurence Smith and his team for their support.

In addition to meeting our Aims through events we have been undertaking direct advocacy work with the State Party DCMS, and others including Historic England and the UK National Commission for UNESCO. We have established regular meetings, with DCMS and other officials, and were invited to join the like of heavyweights National Trust, Historic Royal Palaces and the Heritage Alliance when the Secretary of State wanted a briefing about the potential impacts of the Brexit decision on the heritage sector. In fact our position paper on Brexit, drawn from the membership, has proved useful for DCMS and others.

We commented on the DCMS White paper, and we have had written correspondence exchanges with our Minister, Tracey Crouch. We will also be a named partner organisation at a November History England Parliamentary reception to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of World Heritage Sites in the UK. Advocacy is a slow process to build well, but very easy to lose credibility quickly, so we are working at it carefully and gaining momentum bit by bit. A good example of progress is our invitation from DCMS to form part of the technical evaluation panel for assessing progress of Tentative List Sites. To develop evidence in support of our advocacy work and Site Management we have developed an outline Research Strategy, prepared by Ian Wray and Carol Ludwig from Liverpool University.

Promotional activities have been focused on some excellent Twitter work from our student volunteer Coralie Acheson, and the 30th Anniversary campaign set up jointly between the seven sites, facilitated by WH:UK. The (relatively basic) website has had more than 6,000 visitors in the last year and the blog has more than 100 followers. We aim to undertake more coordinated promotion around World Heritage Day 2017, so please do get in touch with your ideas around that.

While this has all been going on we have grown our Voting membership to 34 organisations, which is fantastic, and added a further 30+ associate members. One of the key outcomes from a strategy prioritisation session at the Giant’s Causeway was to grow that membership further to make the organisation stronger – something we intend to do over the next 12 months.

So to end, I personally am very grateful to our Trustees, our excellent treasurer Beth, our additional committee members and to Chris for all their hard work in this first year of World Heritage UK’s life. We are collectively grateful to our volunteers – Coralie, Don, Diana – to Tim
Bird and Field Fisher for support with meeting rooms, and to everyone who has come to one of our meetings and contributed.

But mostly we thank you, our members for having faith in us to listen to you and do what is best for you. We may not have got it all right so far, we are still learning and most of us are doing it in our spare time, but we are doing it for the membership, so please do tell us what we can do for you and how we can do it better.

Many thanks

Sam Rose
October 2016