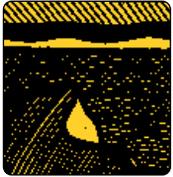


# celebrating open heritage through heritage open days



Photos: Olivier Sykes



The Palais du Luxembourg in Paris – a diversity of places can be visited during European Heritage Days

Every September various sites and properties of heritage interest across England are open to the public as part of the annual Heritage Open Days (HoDs) event, with similar programmes being organised in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> These various national programmes are part of the wider European Heritage Days (EHDs) initiative which takes place across Europe in 50 states that are signatories to the European Cultural Convention.<sup>2</sup>

The initiative has its roots in France, where a similar programme was launched in the 1980s that was then 'uploaded' to the European level<sup>3</sup> – being first supported by the Council of Europe then jointly with the European Union from 1999. One of the key attractions of EHDs is the opportunity to visit many sites and buildings which are not normally accessible. As well as 'tangible' heritage (for example buildings, artefacts, monuments, industrial sites, etc.), the EHDs also incorporate events and access to sites associated with 'intangible' heritage, including cultural practices such as dance, theatre, literature, music, and crafts.

Through the various national programmes a great diversity of places and sites can be visited, ranging from former airfields, to religious buildings, private residences, or institutions whose doors may not usually be open to the public. The initiative thus chimes well with the current vogue for exploring

'the secret histories' of places,<sup>4</sup> families<sup>5</sup> and individuals.<sup>6</sup> It is now cited as England's 'largest heritage festival' and as 'the most widely celebrated participatory cultural event shared by the citizens of Europe',<sup>7</sup> with an estimated 30 million participants visiting 50,000 sites and monuments.<sup>8</sup>

At the European level the EHDs aim to foster Europeans' awareness of 'their shared cultural heritage' and encourage them to become actively involved in its 'protection and enhancement for present and future generations'. They are also a powerful driver of partnership between heritage-related organisations and the mobilisation of civil society – in England, the National Trust<sup>9</sup> and many local civic societies are partners of the festival. Other aims of the initiative include raising citizen awareness of cultural diversity, countering 'racism and xenophobia and encouraging greater tolerance in Europe and beyond the national borders', and inviting Europe to 'respond to the social, political and economic challenges it faces'.

In England the 2017 'Unsung stories'<sup>10</sup> theme has thus sought to 'champion the fact that history belongs to all of us', by shining a light on 'personal histories from the LGBTQ community'.

Elsewhere in Europe, the 2016 programme explored themes such as violence and tolerance (Greece), intercultural relationships and shared



**Conwy Castle and town, where the carving of an EU symbol into the flagstone provoked the ire of UKIP and Conservative councillors**

heritage (Georgia), and heritage and citizenship (France).

The EHODs recognise that definitions of what constitutes valued heritage are also strongly shaped by contemporary events and perspectives. For example, while many may see Britain's heritage as being composed of multiple transnational layers, with contributions and linkages stretching beyond our island shores, events like the 2016 EU referendum campaign (with its manipulation of historical as well as contemporary fact and voicing of nationalist and exclusionary discourses) remind us how contingent perceptions of identity and belonging – and by extension definitions of heritage – can be. More insular and nationalistic definitions of what constitutes valued heritage can reduce the space for the recognition of alternative, or 'unsung', accounts of heritage.

The post-EU referendum period also poses a new heritage question – what is to happen to the tangible and intangible legacies of the UK's period as a member of the EEC/EU? In Conwy, North Wales, a row recently erupted over the EU symbol being carved into a new flagstone in a regeneration project.<sup>11</sup> Presumably those arguing that the EU

symbol is an inappropriate reminder of the UK's membership will not also be arguing for the removal of the UNESCO World Heritage listed Conwy Castle as a tangible artefact of Plantagenet military and administrative subjugation?

Such cases may seem petty and insignificant examples of a certain peevish intolerance stoked by the EU referendum and its aftermath. Yet they echo wider debates about what (and crucially whose) heritage should be valued and preserved, as illustrated, for example, by controversies about whether certain statues and memorials should stand or be removed. Sometimes these can turn into bitter or even violent conflicts, as witnessed recently in the US, where the spark for the confrontation in Charlottesville between white supremacists and counter-protestors was the decision to remove a statue of the Confederate leader Robert E Lee.

Elsewhere, in Ukraine in 2015 the president decreed that all remaining statues of communist leaders should be taken down within six months. In France there have been calls for statues of Louis XIV's finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, to be taken down in light of his role in 1685 in drafting

the legal ordinance that set out the conditions for the ownership of slaves.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the 'Rhodes must fall' campaign successfully secured the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes in South Africa, although in Oxford it failed to get another statue of Rhodes taken down, as donors threatened to withdraw support from the university.

Such debates underline the distinction that many authors have stressed between the notion of 'history' per se and value-based notions of what constitutes significant and valuable 'heritage' worthy of protection. Inevitably such cases are often highly contested and rather complex. Opinion does not always divide along 'predictable' (in so far as anything is predictable these days!) 'conservative' ('rightist') or 'progressive' ('liberal') lines. There are thus some liberals and progressives who also argue against the removal of certain statues, monuments and other landmarks, seeing these as tangible markers of 'dark' chapters in human history. In their view they can act as reminders of past events and focus discussion, interpretation and remembrance.

In some ways the argument here is an echo in brick and stone of George Santayana's celebrated dictum that 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Keeping a statue of a colonialist or slaver standing can thus be seen as a constant reminder that 'those things happened', making their airbrushing from the historical record less easily accomplishable and thus less probable.

In an article about the Colbert debate in France, François Reynaert argues that context is also very important. He notes how the Robert E Lee statue in Charlottesville has become a meeting point and site of celebration for present-day white supremacists. By contrast, in France, Colbert is remembered and celebrated principally as the father of '*dirigisme économique à la française*' (with echoes down to more recent policies such as *aménagement du territoire*), and while the country has its own share of far-right groups, his effigy is not at present a rallying point for them. For Reynaert, a more appropriate response in the French context, rather than simply removing all statues of Colbert, would be to ensure that the contribution of black French women and men to the nation is more fully celebrated and inscribed into the fabric of its urban environments.

### Conclusion

At a time of debates about what constitutes the legitimate history and valued heritage of different places and societies – for example, about whether memorials to those involved in the American Confederacy, colonialism, or the slave trade should

be allowed to remain standing – the various EHDs programmes across Europe offer an opportunity to inclusively explore heritage themes and their contemporary relevance. The commitment at the heart of EHDs to opening up secret places and shedding light on forgotten, or 'unsung', histories reflects an inclusive, 'open' view of heritage, which seems particularly valuable at the present historical juncture.

In the UK we may even take the time to reflect on the European roots of the initiative and how EHDs have themselves become a valued part of the cultural heritage and 'calendar' of Britain's home continent.

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### Notes

- 1 See the Heritage Open Days website, at [www.heritageopendays.org.uk/](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/); Cadw's Open Doors webpages, at <http://cadw.gov.wales/opendoors/?lang=en>; the Doors Open Days website, at [www.doorsopendays.org.uk/](http://www.doorsopendays.org.uk/); and Discover Northern Ireland's European Heritage Open Days webpages, at <https://discovernorthernireland.com/events/ehod-2017/>
- 2 See the European Heritage Days website, at [www.europeanheritagedays.com](http://www.europeanheritagedays.com)
- 3 'Journées du patrimoine: qui est le père?'. *Le Monde*, 19 Sept. 2009. [www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2009/09/19/journees-du-patrimoine-qui-est-le-pere\\_1242718\\_3246.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2009/09/19/journees-du-patrimoine-qui-est-le-pere_1242718_3246.html)
- 4 *The Secret History of Our Streets*. BBC2. BBC, 2016. [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01jt9zh](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01jt9zh)
- 5 *The Secret History of My Family*. BBC2. BBC, 2017. [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b073lqfh](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b073lqfh)
- 6 *Who Do You Think You Are?* BBC1. BBC, ongoing. [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007t575](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007t575)
- 7 See the 'About us' page of the European Heritage Days website, at [www.europeanheritagedays.com/Home/EHD-Programme/About/About-us.aspx](http://www.europeanheritagedays.com/Home/EHD-Programme/About/About-us.aspx)
- 8 See the French Ministry of Culture and Communication's European Heritage Days website, at <https://journesdupatrimoine.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/>
- 9 See the National Trust's 'Heritage Open Days' webpages, at [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/heritage-open-days-2017](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/heritage-open-days-2017)
- 10 See the 'Unsung stories' page of the Heritage Open Days website, at [www.heritageopendays.org.uk/visiting/unsung-stories](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/visiting/unsung-stories)
- 11 'Colwyn Bay EU flag paving slab 'propaganda' criticised'. *BBC News*, 8 Aug. 2017. [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-40860948](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-40860948)
- 12 F Reynaert: 'A bas Colbert? – le général ministre de Louis XIV est aussi le promoteur du Code Noir qui régissait l'esclavage...'. *L'Obs*, 14 Sept. 2017, No. 2758, 22-3