

COLUMNIST **JULES HUDSON**

Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

The issue of funding the restoration of important historical buildings isn't black and white, says Jules, but nor is it a case of investing in the past in favour of the future

It's hard to believe, but it's 10 years or so since the BBC launched the landmark series *Restoration*, that introduced the nation to the plight of numerous buildings and structures that were fighting for survival. Castles, country houses, theatres, viaducts, follies, you name it, all were represented across the British Isles, many in our region. Cardigan Castle, the old Union Workhouse at Llanfyllin and the miners Memorial Hall in Newbridge are good examples I've seen for myself. It was a list of the great and the good, which having fallen on hard times nonetheless played an important role in contributing to the story that is the history of Britain. The point was that, once lost, they'd leave a gap in our historical record that could never again be filled.

A decade on, and I've just finished a short film for the BBC that set out to revisit some of these buildings, to see what progress, if any, had been made. Then, as now, there remains a question central to all of these projects. In such straightened economic times can we justify spending huge sums of public and private money on the past, when there are plenty of calls upon it aimed at investing in the future?

Since 1998, English Heritage has published a list of Buildings at Risk that has now been expanded to include numerous archaeological sites, scheduled ancient monuments, and conservation areas as well. Across the country, thousands of buildings and other monuments are on the list; of those more than 3,000 are within Wales and across the Borders, including Ludlow's Walls and Snodhill Castle near my home in Peterchurch. Thankfully, half of those included on the first register have had their futures secured. Yet one of the key questions of course, is why, if these places are of such national importance, have they fallen into such a state of disrepair?

As we discovered, one of the main problems is ownership, and a struggle to realise a sense of purpose in the modern world that is often at odds with that for which they were originally built. Absentee owners overwhelmed by the scale of work needed are a common feature, as are owners with an unrealistic idea of the value of their ward. Conflicting interests between developers on the one hand and local authorities on the other have also stalled many a worthy local wish to save something, but once again, at the end of the day it's all about the money. Can

we justify maintaining a viaduct when the railway line it was built to carry has long since been closed? Yes it's important, and yes it may have become an iconic feature of the local landscape, but how else might we justify the effort and the spend? Can we, say, find a new role for the print works in Denbigh, when printing is now often undertaken abroad, even though it produced the first Welsh-English Dictionary?

When you look at the range of buildings and other structures involved, it's this sense of purpose

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that's the key to getting projects off the ground. Equally the need to create something that can have a viable economic future and stand on its own two feet is also essential. These aims have often combined to mobilise many community and other groups, determined to do whatever it takes to keep their buildings at risk going, and to find the large sums needed to restore them.

Over the many years that I have investigated and explored such projects, I've always been struck by the stalwart citizen army of volunteers that have led the charge to preserve such an enormous range of monuments. Not only do these sites say something important about their local history, but also together they play an important role in the wider social, economic, political and architectural history of Britain as a whole. For our local heritage heroes, the aim and the justification is crystal clear; they are determined not to live in a world where our most vulnerable historic buildings have been left to rot and disappear. For them, the money involved is a means to an end, for by spending on the past, we are most definitely investing in the future.

- *Black Sheep returns next month.*

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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