

# Conserve and protect

Preserving our landscape heritage for future generations should provide lessons for modern projects as well, says **Patrick Ellis**

**T**he job of English Heritage is to hand designed landscapes over to the next generation," explains Jenifer White, senior landscape adviser at English Heritage. "We see our work more in terms of conservation than just preservation, which we define as 'to keep safe from harm'." As far as White is concerned, conservation is "the process of managing change in ways that will best sustain the heritage values of a significant place in its setting, while recognising opportunities to reveal or reinforce those values for present and future generations. Conservation is a more dynamic concept. And anyway," she says, "have you ever tried to preserve a tree?"

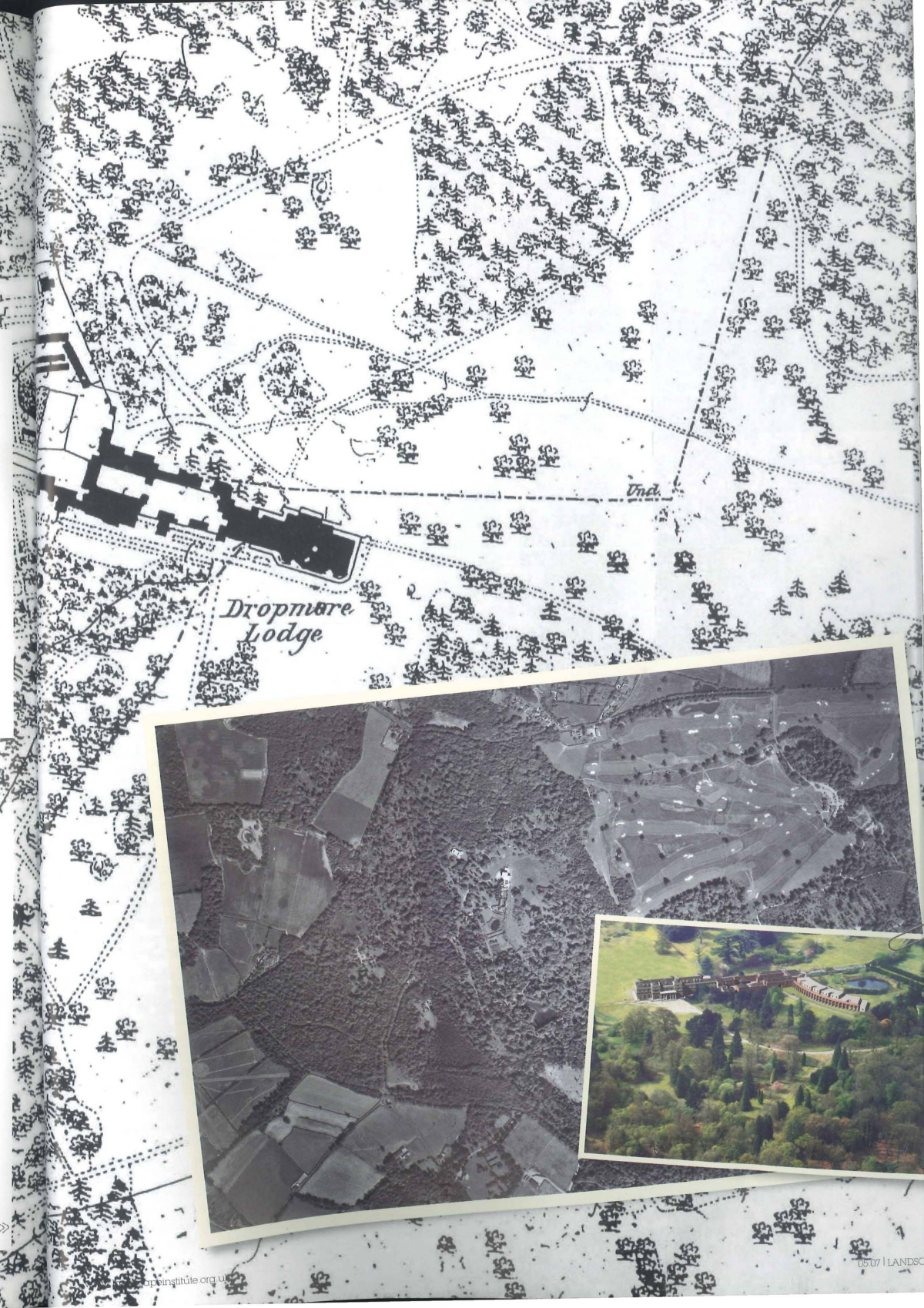
She stresses the importance of transparency in all decisions. "Landscapes are complex and can involve many people. Decisions must be consensual and should be recorded. We are repairing landscapes for the future after all, and it's important that our successors understand why we made decisions."

She insists that a viable conservation management plan is essential and must meet with the agreement of all parties. This is particularly applicable at sites such as Stonehenge, where a moving path system has been adopted to respond to intense visitor pressure. Here, while the stone circle itself is managed by English Heritage, ownership of the surrounding landscape is complex and varied.

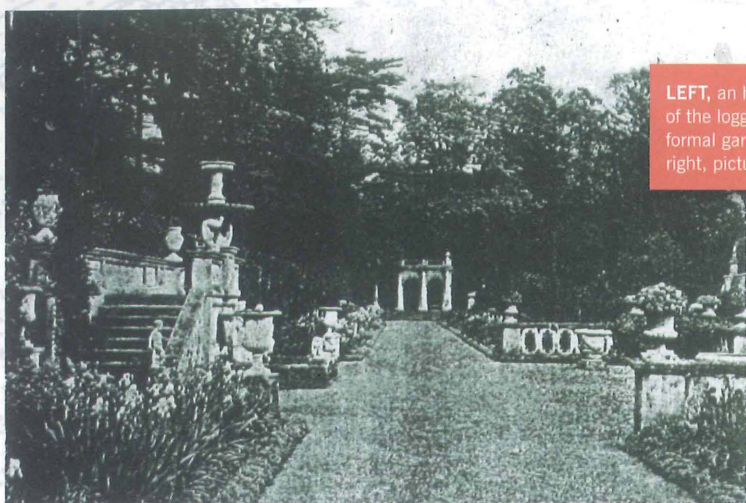
Ownership can be a key issue in the development, and subsequent appreciation, of such a site. At the Dropmore estate in Buckinghamshire, for example, the ownership structure has allowed development to progress without recourse to public finance, although this is not without its own pitfalls. Both Lionel Fanshawe of the Terra Firma Consultancy and Virginia Hinze, English Heritage South East regional landscape architect agree that in the case of Dropmore, progress through the early stages of the project has been slow.

"We look for an exit strategy for the sites such as Dropmore on our Buildings at Risk register," says Hinze. "One of the issues here is that the strategy took some time to crystallise. At one stage, it was proposed that the site be developed as a hotel. Ultimately however, it was agreed that the best usage to retain the integrity of the house and grounds would be residential apartments with the construction of a new wing of discreet, high-end units."

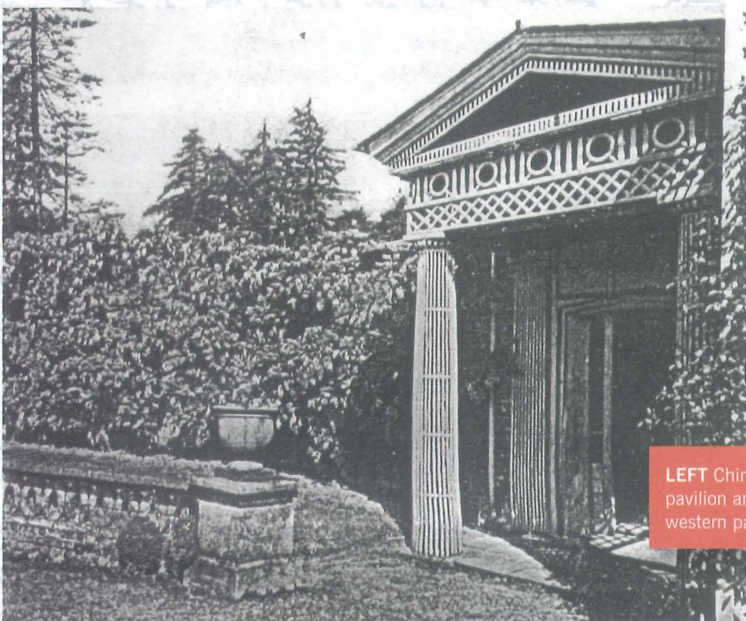
She expands on her organisation's enabling role. "As a non-departmental public body, where we at English Heritage don't actually own the property ourselves, we work closely with local authorities. They have a statutory obligation to consult us in appropriate circumstances, and our recommendations often form the basis of planning conditions. We are keen to develop consensus to help maximise the potential of the >>







LEFT, an historic image of the loggia and Italian formal gardens and, right, pictured in 2003



LEFT Chinese tea pavilion and, right, the western pavilion in 2003



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investment through a deeper understanding of the significance of the properties.

“We want to avoid pastiche and support contemporary and exciting new design initiatives that we feel complement existing buildings and landscapes and that retain an essence of place.”

Dropmore is one of possibly hundreds of properties in England where English Heritage is involved in managing change in designed landscapes. “The landscape here is designated as grade two in our Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England. Although it is unusual for condition to influence this assessment, had it not been in such a poor state of repair following decades of decline, it might have been graded higher,” she says. South Bucks District Council was anx-

ious to conserve the estate at Dropmore as an entity. The council believes that “despite its currently unkempt condition, it is a significant landscape and the authority would wish to see the landscape fully repaired and restored and a management plan implemented to ensure its long term health and continuation”.

The estate, in its current form, dates back to the late 18th century, when it was bought by William Wyndham Grenville, 1st Baron Grenville. A political high-flyer, he served as Home Secretary and then Foreign Secretary under William Pitt the Younger. His most memorable achievement came when, as Prime Minister, he abolished the slave trade in 1807.

A man of strong political conviction, Lord Grenville was no less committed to his estate, situated as it is on heathland overlooking Windsor and his old school, Eton. One of his first acts after starting work on the house was to plant a pair of *Cedrus libanii* – gifts from his brother, the Duke of Buckingham – to the south. Two centuries on, the trees maintain a living link with the past. Design work on the project is proceeding well.

In response to the need for a conservation management plan, Fanshawe has commissioned work from Dr Gerry Wait of Giffords on the landscape archaeology, from Steve Marston on the assessment and management plan of the estate woodlands and from Keith Rushforth on the cataloguing of the pinetum. >>





**ABOVE** The archway to the Italian garden and, above right, the iron gate in the western pavilion, leading to the pinetum



research references earlier sources, 19th century reports in horticultural press and references in the British Museum and the British Library, for example. In the case of the pinetum, a 1963 survey by Alan Mitchell locates some of that author's list of species" at the site.

One of the most exciting areas of research at this stage is Daniel Forshaw's survey of the garden structures. Prominent among these, as Hinze points out, are the Chinese tea house, the loggia, and there is a commitment to restore these as accurately as possible to their mid-19th century condition. Interestingly enough in such a thoroughly researched and concerted process, it is proving difficult to identify a commitment to specific public access agreement at the site, although it is expected that there will be in the future.

Both White and Hinze refer to English Heritage's recently published Conservation Principles. "We want our philosophy to be more accessible and shared by others," says Hinze. English Heritage's role contains a strong educational function. "We want people to understand where we are coming from."

Who cannot but be supportive of that intent? However, it might be well to be aware that this philosophy certainly is not a magic pill to be swallowed and digested overnight. As Jennifer Hinze rightly points out, landscape in Britain is varied and

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complex. It is perhaps not surprising that the English Heritage response to it can be described in similar terms.

Objectively then, in an increasingly virtual age of quick fix, where pragmatism runs ever to the fore, newly-commissioned landscapes can be expected to appear mature in a matter of months rather than decades, or even centuries.

In such a climate, the challenges of the English Heritage philosophy may encourage both a more authentic and a dynamic approach to landscape conservation. It also may lead towards a fuller understanding of the desirability of creating landscapes that will continue to thrive and mature until they themselves become part of the British landscape heritage of two centuries hence. And that would be no bad thing. \*