

Speech by Mr. Simon THURLEY
La Ramée Abbey – 22 May 2014

In this year 2014 when we commemorate the centenary of the start of the First World War it may seem perverse to think back to 1815 and the Battle of Waterloo. But 200 years ago next June we remember the decisive battle of early modern European history. Thank you for the fascinating tour we had today, which brought alive the Battle and reminded us just how narrowly Napoleon lost – ‘A damn close run thing’ as Wellington called it. The English always feel a bit jealous of Napoleon – jealous because he was successful both on the battlefield and in the bedroom and was, of course, hugely glamorous. Even the Duke of Wellington recognised his magnetism: he thought Napoleon’s presence on a battlefield was worth 40,000 men. You see the English problem is that compared to Napoleon, Wellington was really rather boring. One visits Paris and one is amazed by the Emperor’s tomb, the paintings of him by David and the sculptures by Canova. This is how the French celebrate their greatest national hero. When you go to London you discover that all we did for Wellington was name our boots after him.

2014/15 will be important for cultural heritage for a number of reasons. Since 2007 the EU has had the power to develop more actions in the field of culture and thanks to an initiative started by the Belgian presidency of 2010, and continued in Lithuania and Greece, we are expecting a European Commission communication on cultural heritage sometime this year. This will link in closely with the expectation that culture will be included in some form in the revised Europe 2020 strategy that is currently out to consultation.

At the same time the UN General Assembly will be considering the inclusion of culture in the post 2015 Development Strategy, bringing to a head the campaign to have culture recognised as the fourth pillar of sustainable development.

What will all this amount to? A pile of words or a real opportunity to mainstream heritage into European policy making? We, in this room, will have some influence, some weight, in encouraging some positive statements which may become the foundation of something much more significant. We will have a chance to argue for the huge benefits that heritage brings to quality of life, a sense of identity and well-being, to sustainable economic growth and tourism. These facts, for facts they are, should be built into any communication.

To make sure this is the case I think we should consider whether there are some words that we can include in our final statement that will help us back at home to encourage national support for a more rounded approach to the future development of Europe.

And here I would like to pick up what the President was saying. I don’t think we need a directive, I don’t think we need new laws, we need to embed an approach to development that recognises that not everywhere is the same – we have Venice but we also have tens of thousands of other towns with a strong history and identity that need to be nurtured and developed to provide a solid foundation for Europe’s future posterity. We in this room know

that this is not about fossilization; it is about carefully managed change. So what are the obstacles that will prevent culture from taking its rightful place as a pillar of sustainable development? As a key consideration for policy makers?

We hear that there is concern that it is not 'goalable' – (this isn't a word in English, but I know what they mean). How can you measure the impact of cultural heritage on people's lives? Well, in many cases you just can't. But we all know that things which have a beneficial effect quite often can't be measured:- faith, love, the effects of alcohol. So we need to argue for heritage on its own terms for its own importance and not just as a means of creating some other benefit for society.

We are an exclusive club here tonight, only 32 national heritage heads exist, we are few and far between - like nuns in a disco – but I believe we are best placed to develop the arguments that our political masters need to ensure that 2014/15 are the years when the historic environment comes out of the shadow of the natural environment and is taken seriously by politicians and policy makers.

There is a time when hoping and waiting for something to happen just doesn't work – we need Napoleon-like to seize the hour, the day, the year and make 2014/15 the time when Europe's cultural heritage comes of age. We in this room can make a real and powerful difference to this and I hope that we can take up the challenge.