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AIMS, SELECTION PROCESS AND CRITERIA

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The process of nomination and selection is a fundamental element of all plaque schemes. Even in one-off cases, a procedure is followed; at its simplest, this includes the raising of a suggestion and the decision that a plaque is worthwhile (or not, as the case may be). In general, it is likely to involve a wider group of people than those directly responsible for plaque work; notably, one or more proposers (often members of the general public), and a group which is responsible for deciding which proposals are taken forward. The latter may take the form of a committee or advisory panel, and the consideration of plaque nominations may be just one of its functions.

In the majority of instances, the selection process will be assisted and informed by selection criteria and/or guidelines. These provide a framework for the fair and consistent consideration of nominations, and set out the parameters of the plaque scheme in question: what kind of proposals are eligible for consideration, what is and is not possible, and the requirements for commemoration. The criteria are usually the chief expression of the fundamental aims of the scheme.

In particular, criteria are likely to require that a certain level of significance is demonstrated by the plaque proposals. As plaques represent a change to a building, it is vital to be convinced – and to be able to convince others – that there is a strong justification for each case. It has been the experience of English Heritage that plaques work best when their subjects continue to have meaning for people; as plaques bring a part of history into the day-to-day world – connecting past and present – they become a great deal more effective when the subject being honoured can be recognised and appreciated, rather than seeming irrelevant. Brief associations and subjects of only minor importance should, therefore, be considered with particular care.

The selection criteria which underpin English Heritage's blue plaques scheme in London were first formalised by the LCC in 1954, though many of the rules had then been in

operation for some time. For instance, the 'twenty-year rule', which states that a person should have been dead for a minimum of 20 years before they can be considered, had been a guiding principle for the scheme since the nineteenth century. These criteria have clearly proved of widespread practicality and use. In an adapted form, they have been used as the basis for the selection criteria of a number of different schemes, such as those run by the Birmingham Civic Society, Guernsey Museums and Galleries, Leeds Civic Trust, and Newcastle City Council.

The criteria of English Heritage and a number of different other schemes are set out as Appendices I-12. These have been selected



21 Plaque erected by the Woodbridge Society to commemorate the artist Isaac Johnson's residence at 7 Market Hill, Woodbridge, Suffolk.

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as being indicative of the range of approaches in practice. However, it should be noted that such documents are liable to change; indeed, the criteria of some well-established schemes are not represented in this document as they are currently in the process of revision. Where appropriate, detailed and up-to-date information should be sought from the groups concerned.

THE AIMS OF COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUES

Before selection criteria can be formalised, there needs to be a consensus about the aims and intentions of the plaque scheme concerned. The criteria are, essentially, practical tools to enable those specific aims to be met, and will – once finalised – reflect the scheme's *raison d'être*. They help interested parties to understand, at a glance, what the scheme sets out to achieve.

There are a number of possible aims and intentions for plaques and plaque schemes, which are by no means mutually exclusive. For instance, it may be hoped that they will **enhance a local community** by generating interest in the history of a specific town or area and adding to and encouraging a sense of local pride. Where they succeed in doing this, there may be an increase in visitor numbers, the potential benefit of which is reflected by the fact that many schemes are run by the tourism departments of local authorities.

Also, it will often be hoped that plaques will stimulate interest not only in a specific building, achievement, event or person but in a particular realm of endeavour or period of history, and will therefore have an **educational and motivational** role. They can ensure that particular subjects are more widely remembered, and that there is a greater understanding and appreciation of the buildings and physical context in which history was enacted.

ALTERNATIVES TO PLAQUES

In considering a proposal, it will always be important to consider whether or not a conventional wall-mounted plaque is the best way of commemorating the subject concerned. There are a number of alternative approaches, all of which have proven to be successful means of raising awareness about people, events, buildings and associations. For instance, pavement plaques, statues and other sculptural interpretation (such as that undertaken in Coventry to mark the positions of ancient burgage plot boundaries), the founding of historic house museums, the creation of trails, podcast tours and exhibitions, and the awarding of names to streets, buildings and even buses (as in Brighton & Hove). Norwich HEART has particular experience in this area, having initiated an integrated heritage interpretation project in the city; along with commemorative plaques, this has included audio guides, audible signs, street plates, interpretation boards, murals, and the use of mobile technology. In some cases (notably, where a subject's association with a building or area is not of special significance), a memorial may not need to form part of the historic environment. For example, the publication of a biography or the founding of an appreciation society are successful and valid forms of commemoration, and may be more effective means of raising awareness about certain subjects.

The figures, events and historical associations named on plaques may or may not be positive; although the majority of plaques aim to be **celebratory**, others choose not to take a moral stance on the people, occurrences and practices of the past. It should be noted, however, that the general perception is that plaques seek to honour the subject to which they draw attention. As is reflected by the term 'commemorative plaque' and the name applied to a number of early plaques – 'memorial tablets' – they seek to commemorate and perpetuate the memory of people, events or associations, and bring an element of the past into the present and the future. For many, they work best when they give rise to interested curiosity or a smile, something unlikely to happen were a plaque to name a murderer, for instance. Sometimes, it may be relevant to mark a site where something tragic or unpleasant took place (Fig. 22), but thought should always be given as to how this is best done, and whether or not a conventional plaque is appropriate.



22 Not all plaques are celebratory, as is shown by this example marking the site of the assassination of George Villiers (1592-1628), Duke of Buckingham – Buckingham House, 11 High Street, Old Portsmouth. Its design is clearly based on the plaques erected in London by the Society of Arts between 1866 and 1901.

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Commemorative plaques can represent a forcible demonstration of the power of self-belief and how an individual or group can realise their dreams or ambitions. In this sense, the plaques' subjects can prove **inspirational**, especially to young people, and may encourage individual and collective self-esteem. Plaques can also draw attention to elements of history that are not widely known or appreciated, and to people and groups whose contribution has been unfairly overlooked. In this way, as in others, they can provide a sense of **recognition and inclusion**, appealing to people of all ages and from all walks of life and backgrounds, and reflecting the historical and modern make-up of local communities. Where appropriate, this aspect of plaques may be used to help delivery of the wider objectives of a particular group or organisation, such as a local authority.

Plaques, however, relate not just to the subject commemorated, but also to the structure to which they are affixed – where someone may have lived or died, or where something of note may have taken place. This is even more the case where plaques provide an account of the history of a particular building; they will, in all cases, point to its historical significance. Plaques can, therefore, be understood as **connecting people (or history) and place**; they have no life in their own right, but form half of a partnership, and will need to be removed (and perhaps replaced) should the building to which they are affixed be radically altered or demolished (see pp. 128-129).

For English Heritage, plaques are as much about these buildings as they are about the subject being commemorated, and help a structure to tell a tale; as one writer has put it, commenting on the London-wide scheme, plaques 'make our houses their own biographers'.¹ This approach has been upheld throughout the history of the London-wide blue plaques scheme, emphasis being placed on the connection between people and place and how those two interrelate. The form of a building can say a great deal about the character of a particular person who lived or worked there; it can confirm assumptions or, in other cases, come as a complete surprise, casting a new aspect on the individual concerned. Where the building has been radically altered or demolished, this important relationship is seen to have been broken.

Therefore, from the outset, the London-wide scheme has aimed to encourage the **preservation of buildings of historical interest**, and – by marking authentic buildings (rather than their sites) – to educate the wider public about architecture and the historic environment. When the idea of a scheme of commemorative plaques was first mooted in the 1860s, one correspondent felt that the value of marking 'in a permanent manner' the houses of notable persons would be 'the means of saving many a relic which will otherwise be ruthlessly swept away'.²

A number of London's buildings – comparatively unexceptional from an architectural perspective – have been listed on account of the associations commemorated by the plaques that they bear; for instance, the former homes of Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) in Stockwell, of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) in Chelsea and of D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) in Hampstead (Fig. 23), as well as the workshop of John Logie Baird (1888-1946) in Soho. In other instances, a strong historical association may lead to one building being listed at a higher grade than those it adjoins or to which it relates; for example, the birthplace of W. E. Gladstone (1809-98) in Rodney Street, Liverpool, is listed at grade II*, while the adjacent houses in the terrace are grade II.

In this sense, plaques – as signifiers of a building's significance – can play a notable role in the **regeneration** of a street or area, and in its future **conservation**. Even where they do not encourage designation of one form or another (including statutory listing as well as local listing), they may provide an incentive for restoration or repair. Still, while plaques may generate interest, they

1 *The Times*, 4 September 1873, p. 5

2 *The Builder*, vol. XXII, 16 July 1864, p. 533

cannot – in themselves – actually prevent demolition; over 100 of London's blue plaques and the buildings they marked have been lost through redevelopment over the course of the past 145 years or so.

One of the most notable features of commemorative plaques is their power to **surprise** and, through this, to educate. They serve to draw out historical associations which would not otherwise be evident, bringing aspects of history before people who may not otherwise have sought or found it out. For English Heritage, this is a key consideration. Where a link is already found to have been marked or celebrated (perhaps by a museum or a pre-existing tablet), the need for an additional plaque is felt to be negligible. With this in mind, it is interesting that the Transport Trust, in assessing nominations for plaques, ranks a 'hidden gem' higher than a site already nationally recognised. As is outlined elsewhere (see pp. 77-78), it is the obligation of all those who erect plaques to ensure that they are sensitive to the historic environment, and to question the appropriateness of erecting a plaque, especially where it constitutes an addition that duplicates existing information. The chief aim should be the commemoration of a particular subject, rather than the erection of a particular plaque, and the means by which this is best done should be carefully explored.



23 Buildings listed on account of their historical associations include 1 Byron Villas, Hampstead, London, the former home of the writer D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930).

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DEVELOPING SELECTION CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES

The compilation of selection criteria and guidelines will include consideration of the aims outlined above, and will also take account of other desired results. These documents serve as crucial mechanisms of control, placing restrictions on the number of plaques that might be erected and the type of subjects that can be commemorated. The level of this control will differ depending on the scheme in question and the needs of the historic environment.

The specific form and length of criteria and guidelines will likewise vary from scheme to scheme, reflecting their different scales and purposes, as is emphasised by the examples set out as Appendices 1-12. Where a number of initiatives are active in a particular geographical area, it may be that their rules are made complementary to each other, thereby avoiding a proliferation of similar plaques. However, there will always be certain points in common. In general, such documents will address some or all of the following key issues, which are discussed at greater length below:

- The type of subjects that are eligible for consideration (e.g. people, events, sites of historical significance).
- The type of buildings that are eligible for commemoration.
- The level of significance required of the subjects proposed for commemoration.
- The nature – positive or otherwise – of the subject's historical contribution.
- The association of the subject with a particular geographical area and/or building.
- The period of time that has elapsed since a person's death or since an event took place.
- The number of plaques that can be erected per person/subject/building.

Other points and requirements which might be raised are as follows:

- The level of financial support required of the plaque proposer.
- The need for outline consent from the building owner(s) and perhaps from relatives of a person proposed for commemoration.
- The size and form the plaque will take.
- The rules which apply to resubmission (for instance, where a proposal is rejected under the English Heritage scheme, it cannot be reconsidered for a period of ten years).
- The rules regarding the handling of successful nominations (for instance, whether they will be immediately progressed towards plaques, perhaps in the order in which they were received or considered, or whether they will be added to a longlist or shortlist, for action at a future point).

In addition, some choose to clarify the future ownership of the plaque itself. For instance, the guidelines in use by Aberdeen City Council state that the Council 'will retain ownership of the plaque', while those of Guernsey's Blue Plaque scheme state that 'The plaque will belong to the Museum [i.e. the administrator of the scheme] after its fixture to the building'. Care should be taken in making such statements, and they should ideally be based on legal advice. As is discussed elsewhere in this document (see pp. 99-100), it is usual to find that – once a plaque has been installed – it is viewed as having become part of the property to which it is affixed.

Once selection criteria have been compiled and agreed, it is important to ensure that they are upheld and applied consistently, ensuring that each proposal is treated fairly and equally. Nevertheless, rather than being static, the criteria should be revisited and reviewed at regular intervals, to ensure that they remain relevant and functional. The application of selection criteria will usually be the responsibility of a group of people, such as a committee or panel (see pp. 47-49), and will enable decisions to be justified and defended, where necessary.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is inevitable that the criteria will, to a certain extent, be influenced by practical considerations – notably, the amount of money that has been identified and the number of plaques that this can

fund. Many schemes operate a limit of one plaque per subject, both for this reason and as part of a desire for variety; for instance, those operated by Cambridge City Council, Southwark Council and Guernsey Museums and Galleries (on behalf of the Blue Plaques Panel). The one plaque per subject rule is also a policy for English Heritage, and relates less to the overall aims of the London-wide scheme than to the need to balance the large number of subjects who are proposed with the limited funds available.

In general, English Heritage aims to install about 12 plaques in London each year, while most others fix lower targets, usually erecting no more than 5 plaques per annum. This will generally be more than sufficient, particularly in small towns and villages, where sensitivity of the historic environment is an especially important factor; it guards against an unwelcome proliferation of plaques.

Another means of avoiding such proliferation is, with each proposal, to consider the need for a plaque. It may be felt that the subject is already adequately commemorated – perhaps a museum is dedicated to their life and work, for example – or that a form of commemoration other than a plaque would be more suitable (see boxed text on p. 35). This will reduce the number of proposals that can potentially be taken forward, and ensures that the needs of the historic environment are considered in the selection process.

Ideally, in weighing up the worth of each particular case, notice will also be paid to the national context. For instance, rather than commemorating a brief (and perhaps somewhat insignificant) association simply because it falls within the geographical remit of a particular group or body, it may be more appropriate – where the subject is more strongly connected with another part of the country – to refer the case to another scheme.

The target audience of the plaques is likely to be another important practical consideration. Almost invariably, this will (and should) be the general public, and thus it is vital to install plaques in positions which will be readily visible and legible to passers-by. This requirement is made explicit in the criteria and guidelines of a number of schemes, including those run by English Heritage, Aberdeen City Council, the Institute of Physics and the Ulster History Circle.

TYPES OF SUBJECTS ELIGIBLE FOR COMMEMORATION AND TIME REQUIREMENTS

Another vital consideration – strongly reflective of the scheme's aims – will be the type of proposals which are eligible for commemoration. Most notably, whether a scheme will commemorate just people (either at residences, workplaces or both), or whether nominations may also be made for historical sites, where notable events may have taken place or which might be important in their own right. Where both of these categories are relevant, it may be that specific criteria are drawn up for each, as with the schemes run by Cambridge City Council and the City of London Corporation (see Appendices 4 and 5).

A fundamental issue is whether plaques will commemorate figures who are still alive, or whether they have to be dead. In the latter case, and also with regard to proposals concerning events or specific achievements, the criteria will usually state that a certain period of time should have passed before a proposal can be considered.

The London-wide blue plaques scheme has long stipulated that a suggested figure has to have been dead for a minimum of 20 years. This criterion – known as the 'twenty-year rule' – fulfils certain key objectives: it allows a breathing space in which a person's reputation can mature, and helps to ensure that their achievements can be assessed dispassionately with proper historical perspective and that the resultant plaque is therefore fully justified. The GLC, which ran the London scheme between 1965 and 1986, found it particularly useful when considering 'less eminent persons whose reputation may alter fairly rapidly after their death'.³ Guernsey's Blue Plaque scheme is among those that operate the same rule and time period, on the grounds that it 'means that a nominee's career is complete, work evaluated and reputation established. It guards against short-term sentimentality shortly after a nominee's death or transitory popular enthusiasm for a living person whose future actions and achievements cannot be predicted'.⁴

In some cases, it may be found that even more than 20 years is needed for an accurate, unbiased assessment to be made. For example, where the person concerned died young, where many of their colleagues and contemporaries

remain alive and active, and where information relevant to their work and reputation is not yet complete (documents may not have been identified or released).

In other instances, it may be clear that – even though 20 years have not passed – a subject's reputation is well established. With this in mind, the GLC introduced the 'centenary provision' into the London-wide scheme in 1971; this permits the consideration of figures who were born over 100 years ago, even if they have not yet been dead for 20 years. However, the provision does not entitle a candidate to be appraised equally with those who have been dead for more than 20 years. In introducing the criterion, it was recommended that it be used in cases where a person was 'of indisputable fame and of exceptional longevity'. It is, therefore, used only in exceptional circumstances, where a person's fame and/or significance were outstanding and can be demonstrably proven at the time of their consideration.

Such longevity of significance is a key means of limiting the number of plaques that can be erected, and is likely to be a requirement in certain specific circumstances; for instance, where a place is especially rich in historical associations (like London), where the geographical scope of a scheme is broad, and/or where plaques are inset into the face of a building. As such plaques have a considerable degree of permanence, it will be especially important to be stringent in selecting subjects for commemoration and to limit the number of proposals that can be made (and therefore the number of plaques that can be put up). For others, a consideration of long-term significance may simply be irrelevant. For instance, it may be that a plaque's material is known to have a limited life-span, or that it is consistent with the scheme's aims to commemorate someone who is still alive or has died only recently.

Practices therefore vary widely with regard to the necessary time that should elapse before a person is eligible for a plaque, and this is clearly shown in the various criteria set out as Appendices 1-12. In some cases, such as the schemes run by Cambridge City Council, Leeds Civic Trust and the City of London Corporation, 10 years from death is deemed to be sufficient, while the scheme operated by the Institute of Physics has a qualification period of at least 10 to 20 years from death. Others are less specific;

³ Quoted in 'Commemorative Plaque Criteria: The Twenty-Year Rule', presented to the London Advisory Committee on 3 July 1992 (EH blue plaque file)

⁴ Guernsey Blue Plaques Guidelines, June 2009, p.1

for example, the rules of Westminster City Council's Green Plaques Scheme simply stipulate that 'sufficient time has elapsed since [a person's] life to show their lasting contribution to society'.

Meanwhile, whilst it is usual to find that figures need to be dead, schemes such as that run by Southwark Council enable the commemoration of subjects who are still living; in 2003, the actor Michael Caine (b.1933) was awarded a Southwark blue plaque on his birthplace in Rotherhithe, an honour which he said meant more to him 'than a star in the Hollywood walk of fame ever would'.⁵ In such cases, the primary aim of the scheme concerned may be to increase local pride, to encourage tourism and to educate and inspire residents and visitors. In this, the plaques may well prove effective, though there is the possibility that, as the years pass, their subjects may have less and less meaning to people.

For subjects other than people, such as events and other significant moments in history, a period of time may also be fixed. Under the criteria used by Cambridge City Council, this period is 10 years – as with proposals which focus on people – while for the Leeds Civic Trust 'a sufficient period of time must have elapsed for the subject commemorated to be truly regarded as part of history'; it is stated that, in general, this period should be at least 50 years.

Additionally, the question of commemorating fictitious characters or sites may be considered in the preparation of selection criteria. Somewhat inevitably, for instance, there is a plaque to Sherlock Holmes at 221B Baker Street, Marylebone, although it does not form part of the London-wide scheme, which rules out the honouring of people or buildings solely because they figure in works of fiction (as do schemes such as those run by the City of London Corporation and Guernsey Museums and Galleries). Another example is the plaque erected in 2008 on a newly built block of flats in Ashbourne Road, Derby; it commemorates the site of the office in which Lara Croft, heroine of the computer game Tomb Raider, was 'born' in the mid-1990s. It will be for each scheme to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of considering such proposals. Certainly, they are of interest, and often make for popular plaques, but a scheme as a whole – especially one with serious aims and an emphasis on high-quality historical research – can be devalued by the commemoration of such subjects.

TYPES OF BUILDINGS ELIGIBLE FOR COMMEMORATION

Aside from the requirement that a building is visible from the public way (see p. 38), it may be that the selection criteria place no restriction on the types of buildings that can be commemorated. These may include former residences and workplaces, sites of historical interest or importance, places of worship, educational buildings, railway stations, and structures such as bridges and viaducts. As with other elements of the criteria, it is likely that the aims of the scheme will dictate the specific approach. For instance, where a scheme sets out to draw attention to figures of the past, former residences and workplaces are likely to be the focus.

A related consideration is whether or not the scheme will allow the commemoration of sites of former buildings, or whether the structures have to be authentic. Again, this is likely to be dictated by the aims of the scheme. For instance, as the London-wide scheme places so much emphasis on the link between people and place and aims to preserve historic buildings for the future (see p. 36), English Heritage requires that there is a surviving building directly associated with the subject of the plaque proposal. The general rule of thumb is that, were the person being commemorated to find themselves outside the relevant building today, they would still recognise it as their home or place of work. Sites of former buildings are ruled out altogether, and this has the advantage of avoiding certain problematic issues; notably, as site plaques are not connected with any specific building, there may be a need to re-erect them in cases of radical alteration or demolition (see pp. 128-129), possibly on more than one occasion. Other schemes to follow the English Heritage model include those run by Guernsey Museums and Galleries, the Institute of Physics and the Leeds Civic Trust, the criteria of the latter clarifying that 'A major element of the scheme is celebrating the city's built heritage'.

However, the majority of schemes across the United Kingdom take a different approach, and numerous plaques can be found marking sites of former buildings (Fig. 24). Such plaques may be particularly appropriate in areas of widespread redevelopment, and – whilst the focus on the building is undoubtedly greatly diluted or lost altogether – they can achieve a number of important aims; for instance, educating

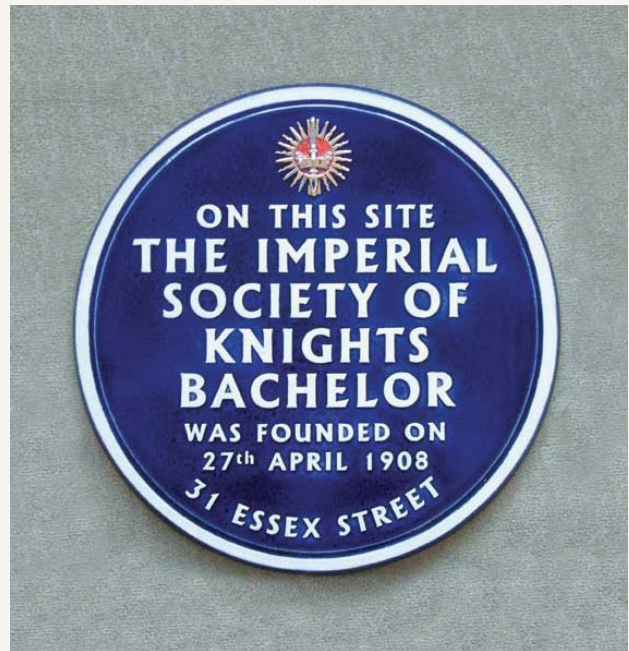
⁵ Information on website of Southwark Council (www.southwark.gov.uk)

the public about little known people, aspects and moments of history, inspiring residents and visitors, and reflecting social and urban change.

Where the commemoration of sites is permitted under the selection criteria, it may be that other rules are introduced to limit the number of potential plaques. Focusing on the historic environment as it survives today is a form of limitation; with the commemoration of sites, the possibilities will be endless, depending on the nature and history of the area and subject concerned. One method of curbing such possible proliferation would be to increase the level of significance required in order for a plaque to be agreed (see below, pp. 41-44).

Wherever possible, though, it is worth aiming for the commemoration of authentic structures, and perhaps using the criteria to allow the commemoration of sites only in certain exceptional circumstances. If a historic connection is thought significant enough to justify a plaque, then it naturally follows that the building concerned must be deemed important too, and should (ideally) be preserved for future generations. A site plaque is no substitute for retaining and conserving a historic building.

Some groups of buildings may require specific mention in the criteria. In particular, buildings which were associated with a large number of people should be approached with great care; these might include hotels, boarding houses, schools, colleges, libraries, public houses, shops, churches, hospitals and care homes. Where one association is commemorated, it can open the way to further plaques, which in turn can have a detrimental effect on the appearance and character of a building, street or even area. With this in mind, the English Heritage criteria generally rule out the erection of plaques in Whitehall and the commemoration of educational or ecclesiastical buildings and Inns of Court. Obviously, there will be times when it is appropriate to mark such buildings with a plaque – notably when one association is particularly strong – but it is always worth considering whether such connections can be more suitably commemorated in other ways (see boxed text on p. 35).



24 A great many schemes across the country permit the commemoration of sites where notable buildings once stood. An example is this plaque, unveiled in 2008 to commemorate the founding of the Imperial Society of Knights Bachelor. It is located at 28-31 Essex Street, just off the Strand, London.

© Ned Heywood

THE LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE REQUIRED

The selection criteria will play a major role in ensuring that a plaque is justified and that it will have meaning to people, both of present and future generations. With this in mind, the requirements in terms of significance should be explicitly stated. For schemes focused on particular geographical areas, the criteria will almost always stipulate that an association with the area concerned should be of importance. The criteria applied by Leeds Civic Trust, for instance, state that the 'event, person, institution or building commemorated must be of very special importance in the history, heritage or shaping of Leeds', and that people 'should have lived or worked in Leeds for a period sufficient for the city to have had a significant influence in forming their character or shaping their activities'. Similarly, the English Heritage selection criteria require that 'a person's residence in London should have been a significant period, in time or in importance, within their life and work'.

This is a means of limiting the number of plaques (and therefore the costs associated with a scheme), and ensures that the number of plaques in a particular geographical context is controlled. It also relates to the importance of the connection between people (or history) and place. Where this was strong, there will be a full justification for erecting a plaque on almost any type of building. On the other hand, where this was fleeting, a plaque may not be justified and alternative options should be explored. Consideration of this issue is likely to be particularly relevant for schemes in places which were, historically, dominated by hotels, lodging houses and second homes; notably, fashionable spa towns and/or other places associated with leisure (such as Bath, Harrogate, Blackpool and Brighton). Likewise, it may be relevant for university towns – it is notable that the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board does not erect plaques on colleges – and areas associated with particular industries or trades, such as Nottingham and Birmingham. Given the number and range of historic associations that such areas may have, there has to be a particularly effective mechanism by which to sift proposals for plaques.

A few schemes make stipulations such as the following, which forms part of the criteria used by the Birmingham Civic Society: figures proposed for plaques should 'have been born in Birmingham or have lived in the city for a period of at least

IS A PLAQUE JUSTIFIED?

It is always worth questioning whether a particular association is important enough to justify a plaque. This is especially relevant when considering whether or not to commemorate a person's stay at a hotel or guest house, which may have lasted only for one or two nights' duration. A case in point is the plaque erected in 2006 by Dartford Borough Council on the site of The Bull and George Inn in Dartford, where the novelist Jane Austen (1775-1817) occasionally stayed on the way to visit her brother at Godmersham Park, near Canterbury. Drawing attention to such a slight connection with a particular place – which of course would have been shared by hundreds if not thousands of other guests who stayed at the inn – can undermine a plaque's primary purpose, which is to mark places and associations of special historical significance. Spa towns and resorts, such as Bath, present particular problems in this regard for they have welcomed innumerable visitors, many of whom spent only a few weeks or months at a particular address.



25 A factor in considering nominations for plaques will be the popularity of a particular subject, as well as their significance. This plaque, erected by English Heritage in 1997, honours Jimi Hendrix, who lived at 23 Brook Street, Mayfair, London, for several months in 1968-69, a period of importance within his life and career.

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five years'. However, it is usual to find that no specific limitation is placed on the amount of time a person, group or organisation should have spent at an address or in a particular locality. Instead, the significance of that time – be it 4 months or 40 years – is established through careful historical research (see pp. 66-67). In general, though, the connection should be as long as possible (certainly running into months and years, rather than days and weeks). It is suggested that – where it totalled less than two years – the nature of the link should be carefully assessed before a plaque is deemed to be suitable. It may be, in such instances, that a case is instead referred to a scheme active in an area of greater relevance to the subject proposed for commemoration.

It will almost always be the case that, in addition to the importance of the connection, the criteria will call for scrutiny of the significance of the subject of the proposal (the means of ascertaining such significance are discussed on pp. 53-56). The way this is approached will vary with the focus of the scheme. Where this is limited to one particular profession, it will be possible to be highly specific; for instance, the criteria used by the Royal Society of Chemistry stipulate that a site should have seen 'a major contribution to the development of chemical science', while those of the Institute of Physics state that the person to be honoured 'must be recognised as an outstanding physicist, scientist, astronomer etc. who has contributed to the advancement of physics by his/her theories, discoveries or inventions'.

In other instances, requirements will be more general in nature. The criteria are likely to state, for instance, whether a subject should be of international, national, regional or local importance, and the mechanisms that might be used to ascertain the level of this significance (such as the consultation of experts). For the English Heritage scheme, which is focused on historical figures, the criteria require that:

- i. There shall be reasonable grounds for believing that the subjects are regarded as eminent by a majority of members of their own profession or calling.
- ii. They shall have made some important positive contribution to human welfare or happiness.
- iii. They shall have had such exceptional and outstanding personalities that the well-informed passer-by immediately recognises their names.

or

They deserve national recognition.

Under point iii, the first criterion refers to figures who could broadly be defined as popular (Fig. 25), while the second takes into account figures who may have been of special significance, but whose names are not necessarily well known to the public at large (Fig. 26). It therefore allows plaques to play a truly educational role by drawing attention to people such as inventors, pioneers and others who perhaps worked behind the scenes. It should also be noted that the English Heritage criteria require a subject to have made a positive contribution, ruling out the consideration of notorious criminals such as Dr Crippen (1862-1910). In addition, the English Heritage criteria state that overseas visitors to London should be of international reputation or of significant standing in their own countries.

A number of other schemes have followed a similar approach (and, indeed, wording), both with regard to a figure's significance and the need for a positive contribution. However, while the criteria of English Heritage require that figures, events or institutions be of national (or even international) significance – an approach that reflects the historical richness of London and the national remit of EH – such considerations may not be applicable to other schemes, especially those focused on particular geographical areas.



26 Plaques may play an educational role by drawing attention to subjects who were of significance, but whose names are not necessarily well known. An example is Elizabeth Fry, prison reformer, commemorated at the Friends Meeting House, Upper Goat Lane, with a plaque erected under the joint initiative of Norwich HEART and Norwich City Council.

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Instead, the criteria are likely to be made relevant to that area, requiring local or regional significance; a good example of this is provided by Guernsey's Blue Plaque scheme (see Appendix 6).

While such principles will remain broadly the same for the consideration of historical events and institutions, a different approach may be needed for plaques which draw attention to the history and interest of certain buildings; for instance, their architect, date and original function (Fig. 27). Considerations in defining their worthiness for a plaque may include the following:

- The building's significance within the history of an area, or within the country as a whole.
- The importance of its structure or design.
- The building's associations.
- The building's prominence within the streetscape.
- Whether or not the building's significance can be adequately and succinctly relayed by a plaque inscription (see pp. 88-90).

In these cases, in particular, thought should be given to the appropriateness of a plaque, and whether the history and importance of a building – especially where it has a public use – would be better relayed via alternative means, such as an information board or booklet (see boxed



27 Many plaques seek to draw attention to the history of certain historic buildings, and not solely to their historical associations. For instance, this plaque erected by the Ludlow Civic Society, Shropshire, to commemorate Castle Lodge, Castle Square.

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text on p. 35). A specific association or event is easily conveyed by a plaque, but a building's intrinsic interest often requires a fuller explanation than is suitable for a plaque inscription. Furthermore, where a building is in itself of significance, a plaque may detract from its design, special interest and character.

SPONSORSHIP AND CONSENTS

A great many schemes rely upon the proposer for more than just the plaque nomination. Not only are they asked to provide full details about the subject proposed for commemoration, but they may also be required to arrange at least partial funding for the plaque, and the amount needed may be stated in the selection criteria or guidelines. Furthermore, the administrators of the scheme may need to see evidence that the owner(s) of the building concerned have given their outline consent to the plaque proposal. A minority of schemes also ask the plaque proposer to provide evidence that surviving relatives of the subject concerned approve of the nomination; for instance, this is the case with the schemes run by Aberdeen City Council and Westminster City Council.

Although the consent of relatives is usually seen as desirable rather than necessary, and owner consent will need to be confirmed later on in the process (see pp. 99-102), it is common to find that such issues are included within selection criteria and guidelines.

The principal criteria of Leeds Civic Trust, for instance, state that 'The owner of the structure needs to be amenable to the erection of the plaque' and that 'There must be a sponsor or group of sponsors prepared to meet the cost of the plaque'. These matters are discussed in more detail below (see pp. 45-46).

SELECTION PROCESS

NOMINATIONS FOR PLAQUES

The process of encouraging and handling nominations may be formal or informal. At one end of the spectrum would be a specific campaign calling for plaque proposals from members of the general public, with a set nomination form and stipulations about information to be provided; at the other end of the spectrum would be the sporadic suggestion of names, perhaps by neighbours, friends or colleagues, with few further details. In the latter instance, it may be that members of the general public are not involved at all, and that the plaque process is driven entirely by one particular organisation, such as a specialist society or history group. This may also be true where a proactive approach is taken to plaque nominations, usually with the aim of commemorating a particular group of people or of achieving greater variety in terms of both the subjects and locations of plaques (see pp. 139-140).

The approach that is chosen with regard to plaque nominations will relate to factors including the scale of the scheme, the nature of the group or body responsible for it, the size of its geographical remit, the amount of time and funds available, any conditions of sponsorship or grant aid, and the scheme's aims; for instance, where community engagement is a major component, then public nomination should always be possible. It is suggested that, the more ambitious the scheme and the broader its coverage (considering both the type of nominations and the physical area), the more there is a need for a formalised system of handling nominations. It should be noted that, even where an informal approach is adopted, suggestions raised from within the relevant organisation should always be subject to the same scrutiny that would apply to public nominations.

The initial step is, of course, to call for and encourage nominations in the first place. Once a scheme is well established, proposals are likely to come in unprompted, driven by the existence of the plaques themselves, by promotional events and material, and by knowledge about who is responsible for the scheme's administration. However, where a scheme has been recently set up, there is usually a need to be more proactive – to make a conscious and concerted effort to invite suggestions, and to make people aware of the initiative. This should aim to reach as wide and diverse a group as possible – people of different ages, genders, religions, ethnic and social backgrounds – albeit that they may be based in a particular geographical area. Even when a scheme is well underway, proposals from such a diverse group should be actively encouraged (see pp. 139-140).

The precise means of encouraging public nominations will vary with the individual scheme, but is likely to include some of the following:

- Sending targeted mail-shots to buildings in a particular area.
- The placing of information in sites such as railway stations, local museums, libraries, community centres, religious buildings, schools and colleges.
- Producing a press release and contacting local radio stations, television, newspapers, magazines and relevant publications.
- The creation of a website (see pp. 137-138), and the use of existing local news websites.
- The sending of 'e-flyers' and information to interested parties (including specialist societies and community groups).

It is invaluable to contact, at an early stage, key local groups and organisations, such as the local planning authority, any local civic or historical society, and the local record or archives centres – many of whom may have been involved in the project planning and fundraising – while direct contact with local schools, colleges and universities can be an excellent means of encouraging participation.

Nominations can be invited on an ongoing basis – if the scheme hopes to run into the foreseeable future – or to a given deadline. It will be important to be specific about the background and aims of

the scheme, the selection criteria or guidelines, the information that should be provided, and the way in which nominations should be made. There could, for instance, be a nomination form – as with schemes such as those run by the City of London Corporation, Lewisham Council and the Royal Society of Chemistry – placed online and/or given out as a hard copy.

The kind of information to be provided as part of a formal nomination will be along the following lines:

- Biographical or historical information about the subject of the plaque proposal.
- Further relevant information, such as details of exhibitions, publications and ongoing studies.
- The reasons the subject is thought to deserve commemoration with a plaque, considering the selection criteria.
- The buildings associated with the proposal (perhaps residences or places of work).
- One or more photographs of the building suggested for commemoration, and a location plan.

A number of schemes place additional onus on the proposer by asking for them to arrange sponsorship for the plaque or to make a financial contribution. The guidelines of the Guernsey scheme, for example, state that 'The cost of plaque manufacture and installation will need to be covered by sponsorship, and the proposer should consider the availability of likely sponsorship when making the proposal', while proposers for a Westminster City Council green plaque are asked to provide 'a written offer of sponsorship for the cost of the plaque'.

Furthermore, the proposer may need to obtain the approval of surviving family members of the subject of a proposal and seek outline ('in principle') consents from the owner(s) of the building concerned. Under the scheme run by Aberdeen City Council, the proposer has to include 'evidence that the owners and those residing or working within that building approve of the proposed mounting of the plaque', while the Royal Society of Chemistry even stipulates that nomination forms for plaques should carry the signature of 'a senior representative from the site denoting site support for the nomination'.

This approach will only be possible where a proposal is, from the outset, focused on one particular building (rather than on one subject associated with a range of addresses). The provision of such information helps to ensure that the case runs smoothly, although the consent of the owner(s) concerned will always need to be confirmed later on, and they will need to be given the chance to comment on the proposed design and positioning of the plaque (see pp.99-102).

It should be noted that, for schemes which aim to engage with particular communities or the public at large, these stipulations may not be appropriate. In such cases, it is important to be as inclusive as possible, understanding that – for many people – the prospect of arranging sponsorship, owner consents, identifying and contacting family members, and/or compiling large amounts of information may be daunting. Instead, it should be possible for a nomination to comprise a simple letter or form, though this may have consequences for the amount of historical research, fundraising and other work required later on.

Usually, once a nomination has been raised or received and its eligibility for consideration has been confirmed, acknowledgement will be made and the proposer will be informed about the next steps; for instance, when their nomination will be considered, and when they will be informed of the outcome. This involves an important element of managing expectation and potential disappointment (see p. 49), especially where it is known that many nominations may be unsuccessful, perhaps due to financial limitations. The person or people responsible for handling the nominations will log them, and will probably like to keep a regular tally on numbers. In some cases, this might prompt a renewed campaign of inviting nominations; in others, it will prompt the arrangement of a meeting of the group responsible for considering suggestions for plaques, especially where that group likes to consider a maximum number at a given time.

Before such a meeting takes place, historical research may be carried out into plaque proposals (see pp. 53-56). Under the English Heritage scheme, about 100 nominations are made each year for plaques in London. Around 30 cases are taken to each meeting of the Blue Plaques Panel, the historians being given an average of a day to investigate each nomination and to establish its general worth for a plaque. Cases will take less or more time depending on the amount of information provided by the proposer.

METHODS FOR DECIDING WHICH NOMINATIONS ARE TAKEN FORWARD

This is perhaps the most crucial element of the selection process, and constitutes a consideration and assessment of the various nominations. It assumes, of course, that not all nominations can be progressed towards plaques, and that a process of selection is necessary or appropriate. This will almost always be the case, to ensure that all plaques meet an agreed standard of significance and, perhaps, on account of limited resources.

In some instances, the process will be informal, especially where there are no fixed selection criteria; cases may, for example, simply be discussed by two individuals, in person, by email or on the telephone. Certainly, more than one person is usually involved in the decision-making process, and it adds strength to the process (and scheme) to open the matter up for discussion by a wider group.

It may be that limitations are imposed upon the number of nominations that can be agreed at any one time. Although English Heritage does not operate such a system – shortlisting proposals according to their worth – it may have benefits where only a very limited number of plaques can be erected each year. For instance, under the Guernsey Blue Plaque scheme, the panel – at each of its twice yearly meetings – shortlists a maximum of five nominations, and does so in order of preference. Other nominations are either unsuccessful or are placed on a 'long list', to be considered at some future point.

What tends to be the most popular means of reviewing nominations – through the use of a specific group of people (such as a committee) – is discussed below. An alternative method is the use of a system of **public vote**. One of the most prominent schemes to follow this approach is that set up in 2003 by Southwark Council in London (Fig. 28). A shortlist of proposals is drawn up from a longer list of public nominations, following discussion by a steering group, and this is then published for public voting; for instance, online and in the local newspaper.

The strength of such an approach is that it is inclusive, directly involving members of the public and adding an element of transparency to the selection process overall. However, it has its pit-falls; for instance, people tend to select names that are well known to them, and this can undermine a scheme's educational role. Also, a level of public

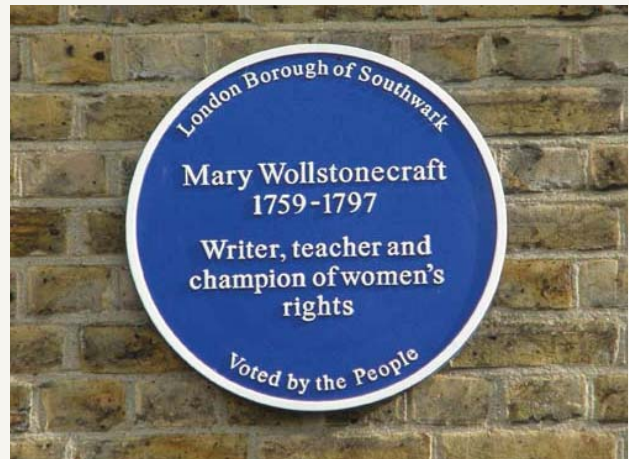
expectation is raised, and this may prove impossible to fulfil where consent is refused by the owners of the relevant buildings.

Committees and Advisory Panels

Where a scheme is set up on a semi-permanent or permanent basis, where there are fixed selection criteria and/or where there are a fair number of nominations, it will usually be thought appropriate to present plaque proposals to a group of people – such as a committee or advisory panel. The consideration of plaque suggestions may form only part of its work and remit. This may be particularly relevant for local authorities and civic societies, where committees will already be in existence, or in instances where plaques can be grouped together with other forms of memorials.

Since 1989, English Heritage has drawn upon the expertise of a specially formed advisory panel, known as the Blue Plaques Panel. This meets three times a year, and considers all plaque nominations which meet the basic criteria, together with any other relevant issues. The Panel takes special heed of the impact plaques have on the historic environment. In some cases, it may be relevant and advantageous to involve such a group even more closely in this aspect of a scheme's work. Under the LCC, in the early twentieth century, the relevant committee went to visit at least one site to discuss plaque positioning, and also considered issues to do with design, criteria and overall aims.

Whether the group is formal or informal, and whether its remit is focused on plaques or has a wider range, it will be important to ensure that **relevant expertise** is represented. For instance, where a scheme concentrates on a particular geographical area, it will always be beneficial to include at least one local historian or expert, and also an officer of the local planning authority. Other members of the group or committee are likely to be chosen where their skills and/or backgrounds have particular relevance to the scheme in hand, and the nature of the nominations. For example, where an area or scheme takes in a number of sites relevant to the armed forces, a military historian may form part of the group. Where funding has been awarded to a scheme by a local (or even national) organisation, a representative may also form one of the members of the committee or panel.



28 Some schemes use a system of public vote to decide which nominations should be taken forward. For instance, this approach is followed by Southwark Council, which has erected plaques including that to Mary Wollstonecraft at 45 Dolben Street, London. The aim of the plaque – not clear from its inscription – is to commemorate the fact that she lived in a house on the site in 1788-91.

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It is advisable that the group as a whole aims to **reflect the community** at large in terms of the age, gender, social backgrounds and ethnicity of its members. Of necessity, a chair of the group is likely to be selected first, a process which may involve the chair or president of the organisation or group responsible for the scheme. The chair of the committee or panel can then work with the administrators of the scheme in selecting additional members. Names may have been formally proposed (by colleagues, or others involved in the scheme), people may have volunteered, or places may be advertised. It is good practice for this process to be above-board and transparent, and this will be a necessity where the scheme is run by a public body, such as a local authority.

As the group will play such a key role in the selection process, it is important to consider (and, where possible, plan) its **overall effectiveness**. Members should be chosen not only on an individual basis, but because they complement the skills of others, so that the resulting committee or panel represents as broad a range as possible of expertise, experience and backgrounds, though specific experts can – in addition – be consulted as necessary or appropriate (see pp. 55-56). It is worth noting that members are most likely to be prepared to serve on a voluntary basis, though costs of travel may need to be met.

A PANEL IN PRACTICE

The means of assessing plaque nominations varies from scheme to scheme, though it is common to find that a group is tasked with selection. A good example of a formally constituted selection committee is provided by the Guernsey Blue Plaque scheme, which in 2009 instituted a Blue Plaques Panel to consider new suggestions (Fig. 29). Chaired by the current Bailiff of Guernsey, the five-member panel includes representatives of the Culture & Leisure Department Board, the Council of La Société Guernesiaise, the Museums Society and the Arts Commission, together with a further member co-opted to act as Secretary. The Guernsey scheme aims to put up one or two plaques a year and judges each nominee against a set of criteria (see Appendix 6). In the words of its first Chairman, Bailiff Sir Geoffrey Rowland, the scheme aspires 'to be very selective, just as English Heritage is'. Nominations are either rejected, shortlisted or placed on a 'long list' of eligible nominees awaiting commemoration in the future.

There are a number of **advantages** to constituting a group of this kind, aside from the obvious expertise that it brings to bear on the nominations made for plaques. For instance, members can involve themselves in other stages of plaque work, perhaps representing and promoting the scheme at events such as unveilings. Where they are prominent or influential figures, this can serve to increase the scheme's profile and encourage interest among both press and public, although it may mean that they are lobbied about particular nominations. The group can also serve to depersonalise the important decision-making process almost always involved in awarding plaques, and take collective responsibility for outcomes. Disappointed proposers and others will often find a considered, collective decision easier to accept than one that has been taken by an individual.

Formal committees and advisory panels will normally be governed by **terms of reference**. These will outline the working of the group – its general function, how often it meets, the number of members, the number that is considered a quorum (ensuring the effective consideration of nominations), and the nature of its authority: whether the group is responsible for making the final decision, whether it advises others, or whether its recommendations need to be endorsed. The document will also set out the roles of its members – for instance, the extent of their terms and whether or not they can be

reappointed – and may state that members are not permitted to engage in correspondence with plaque proposers. Additional details may cover the role and terms of specific officers of the group, who may include a chair and a vice-chair, as well as a secretary, who will usually be connected with the scheme's administration and can work to ensure the selection criteria are upheld.

Careful thought should be given to preparing these terms of reference, for the document can have an important impact on the business of a committee or panel and, therefore, on the plaque scheme concerned. In particular, the time-frame of members' terms should be thought through and discussed, and decisions should be made regarding the maximum amount of time that members, and the chair, can serve. While it can be invaluable to have a continually replenished reservoir of knowledge and expertise, it is also important to have consistency and familiarity with the work of a scheme, in addition to that of the people responsible for its administration.

The business of the committee or panel will usually be governed by the plaque scheme's **selection criteria** or guidelines, and informed by **historical research**, presented either in person, as written reports, or both. Such reports may make recommendations, or may suggest particular matters for discussion (see pp. 69-70). The result



29 The Blue Plaques Panel responsible for considering nominations made under Guernsey's Blue Plaque scheme. Shown from left to right are: Deputy Gloria Dudley-Owen (Culture and Leisure Board), Edith Le Patourel (La Société Guernesiaise), Bailiff Sir Geoffrey Rowland (Chair), Dr Jason Monaghan (Guernsey Museums and Galleries) and Helen Glencross (Secretary to Panel).

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will (or should) be fully informed decisions, taken with awareness of all the issues relating both to the case in hand and the scheme overall. The group should take care that the selection criteria are applied consistently and fairly; this will ensure public confidence in the scheme, and will provide it with a sense of unity and distinctiveness.

Finally, it should be noted that the business of formal committees or panels will ideally be documented in the form of **minutes**. These provide an invaluable record of the members that were present, the matters that were discussed, the decisions that were made, and any actions that resulted from the meeting. Where they exist, such minutes will form a vital part of the paper archive for each plaque and the scheme overall (see pp. 120-121), and will capture comments and suggestions which may prove useful later on – for instance, concerning the proposed wording of a plaque inscription. As with other paperwork generated by the plaque process, the public should ideally be able to have access to these minutes, though data protection and other issues (and potential exemptions) will obviously be relevant. For public bodies, such as local authorities, minutes are likely to be one of the key documents requested under the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), since they document the various decisions that have been made.

MANAGING DISAPPOINTMENT

There are two outcomes of the decision-making process for commemorative plaques. A nomination may be approved – in principle or in full, depending on the nature of the information considered – or it may be turned down, based on summary or (in certain instances) more detailed advice and information. In the former case, everyone is pleased, and the case moves on to the next stage, the gaining of consents (see pp. 99-108). The latter case is harder to manage. Naturally, where nominations are unsuccessful, there is often disappointment on the part of the proposer and any others who have supported the proposal, and it is important to be understanding about this and to explain the reasons for the decision in clear and sympathetic terms.

On account of the scale and popularity of the London-wide blue plaques scheme, and the fact that many more nominations are made than can be approved, English Heritage has extensive experience in this area. It has found that it is useful to research and suggest alternatives when contacting a proposer; for instance, there may be another active plaque scheme in the area, or it may be possible for the proposer to arrange for the installation of a plaque under their own initiative. The time that is taken to manage this part of the process will depend on the size of the scheme and the number of nominations which tend to be received.

However, its importance should not be underestimated for schemes which find that a comparatively high number of nominations have to be turned down on a regular basis. If it is not managed, the standing of the scheme overall could be negatively affected; for instance, by a gradual decrease in popularity and by the publication of critical articles in the press. These can be tempered, not only by maintaining good relationships with proposers, but also by being open and clear about the selection process and criteria, the limitations of the scheme (perhaps imposed by budget), and by emphasising and promoting its successes.

With all plaques, it is important not to raise expectations, and to ensure that proposers understand the process that needs to be followed. Most notably, that plaques can only be erected with the consent of the relevant property owner(s) and, where relevant, the local planning authority. It can take time to secure the owner's approval, and it may be that such consent is withheld altogether, an outcome which can be enormously disappointing and frustrating to all, especially to the plaque proposer.