

Personal View: Caroline Kay on heritage and development



"We shouldn't let our history hamper our future". This noisy 'alarm' was sounded in last week's editorial piece about the South Quays project, implying that heritage concerns were responsible for anchor tenant BMT's withdrawal.

For the record, Historic England, the nation's statutory advisor on heritage matters, said that the original proposals for South Quays breached national and local planning policy and damaged the World Heritage Site. Fair enough then, to take notice. However, I am told the redesign still delivered BMT's requirements for 45,000sq ft of lettable space. So let's kill off the idea that heritage denied B&NES their tenant.

In fact BMT, like much of the private and public sector in Bath, positively sells itself on Bath's heritage. The company's website states: "BMT Defence Services is proud of its ties to Bath because not only is the city a UNESCO Heritage Site, it was also home to Lord Nelson between 1758 and 1805". The

inward investment body, Invest Bristol+Bath, states: "Bath is an incredible city, full of history, energy and proven success". Our universities – contributors of around £394m to the local economy – say proudly: "A world class university in a World Heritage City" (Bath University) and "Based in a World Heritage city" (Bath Spa). And this is before I even mention tourism, which brings over £430m spend to the city.

The economy, far from being hindered by Bath's heritage, sees it as a necessary part of its identity. In turn this would suggest that damaging our heritage would damage business.

We've heard last week's editorial before. In 1909, the Chairman of Bath Corporation said "he was not an admirer of the supposed ancient specimen of architecture... it would be a great improvement if the whole thing was cleared away." In 1934, Members of the Corporation passed the draft of the Bath Bill, proposing major demolitions and remodelling, without even seeing

the actual bill itself (sounds familiar?)

Both of these attempts to destroy the past in the name of progress failed. In the 50s and 60s, whole swathes of streets were pulled down rather than being restored and repurposed. That Sack of Bath, resulted in Bath Corporation's planning powers being temporarily taken from them by central Government as they could not be trusted to make good decisions which protected the city. Ironically, these are the developments now being "regenerated" – a polite word for being pulled down because they are no good. The former Southgate and the Avon Street car park, anyone?

Our history should and does inspire our present, and our future. This is what organisations like Bath Preservation Trust passionately believe. But to continue to do so, heritage must be cherished, understood, celebrated and respected.

Yes, this may sometimes mean that developers cannot do exactly what they

want in Bath. There are plenty of brownfield sites outside Bath where there would be no such constraints – but, unsurprisingly, that is not where the businesses, or tourists, or universities want to be.

Heritage protection is about ensuring that the inspiration, social dynamism and the enterprise which created both Roman and Georgian Bath, can still be identified around us for us to draw on and develop further. As Wordsworth, whose daughter married in Bath Abbey, wrote: "The child is father of the man". Our history doesn't hamper our future. It gives it life.

■ Caroline Kay is Chief Executive of the Bath Preservation Trust, an independent charity set up in 1934 to protect and preserve the city and its green setting while recognising its need for a sustainable future. The Trust also runs four museums which interpret the city's past while contributing jobs and income to the local economy.