Historic England Advisory Committee

Cecil Rhodes Plaque, Oxford: Listing Assessment

Date of meeting: 28 June 2018
Presenter: Duncan Wilson / Deborah Mays

1 Issue

1.1 In the sensitive context of contested heritage this listing application requires particularly robust and assured handling. Nominated when its relocation was under consideration in 2016, HE has delayed making a recommendation following consultation on the facts of the case pending statement of HE’s position on contested heritage. Our handling has been the subject of recent FOI and media inquiries. HEAC’s opinion is now sought on the recommendation we should make to DCMS.

2 Questions for the meeting

2.1 HEAC Members are asked:

   a) To consider carefully the context of this case: the circumstances set out below, including arguments in favour and against Listing in line with the designation criteria, precedent and practice

   b) To agree the recommendation on balance not to list the plaque

   c) Consider handling, in terms of press statement, response to the nominee, media activity.

3 Background

3.1 Historic England has engaged with the current debate on contested-heritage and believe in public discussion to promote public understanding and appreciation of the heritage. Oxford historians have set out the context for this plaque in the ‘Rhodes must Fall’ campaign, see rhodes_king_edward_st.

3.2 This bronze portrait plaque to Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902), was erected in 1906 at 6 King Edward Street, Oxford, designed by Onslow Whiting, gifted and commissioned by Sir Alfred Mosely, Rhodes’ friend and fellow Cape diamond merchant, later also an educationalist and philanthropist. It was to mark the place where Rhodes had taken lodgings in Michaelmas term 1881, when studying for an MA at Oriel College. The plaque is sited in the Oxford Central Conservation Area, approximately 2m high, and includes the Oriel crest of three lions rampant.
3.3 Onslow Whiting (1872-1937) was a Letchworth-based sculptor and silversmith who taught at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London. Whiting is responsible for several listed memorials commemorating those who fell in the Boer War, including one erected by Alfred Mosely, and Letchworth’s First World War memorial on Station Place.

3.4 Cecil John Rhodes is a controversial figure for his actions in Africa as an imperialist, colonial politician and mining entrepreneur. His philanthropic activity and legacies had a major impact on Oxford University. He left a sizable endowment to Oriel and provided for 160 scholarships to Oxford for young men from Canada, Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia, New Zealand, Newfoundland, Bermuda, Jamaica, Germany, and the United States. The scholarship programme continues to run, with beneficiaries known as Rhodes Scholars.

3.5 The Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings (DCMS, March 2010), which set out the key criteria for statutory listing, state that to be of special architectural interest a ‘building’ must be of importance in its architectural design, decoration or craftsmanship; and to be of special historic interest a building must illustrate important aspects of the nation’s social, economic, cultural, or military history. The Principles advise that after 1840, because of the increased numbers of buildings erected and the much larger numbers that have survived, progressively greater selection is necessary.

3.6 The Historic England Selection Guide for Commemorative Structures (2017) advises that ‘Commemorative structures are particularly rich sources of information about past lives. They tell a complex story about the evolution of English society, and are sometimes our only source of evidence for some sections of society.’ The Guide also notes that ‘Statues and sculptures are often prominent features within the public realm and private grounds alike, and are often of high aesthetic quality and historic interest. These generally will have been identified and should normally be protected.’ In terms of precedent, see appendix on listed bronze portrait plaques.

3.7 Against this we must assess the plaque’s level of special interest:

**Pros**
- Decorative bronze portrait relief and dedication by Onslow Whiting, a notable sculptor.
- Interest of Sir Alfred Mosely’s patronage, as benefactor of the plaque, fellow diamond merchant and significant medical and educational philanthropist.
- Unusual as a personal tribute on a building (more akin to modern day blue plaques), not in funerary context.
- Rhodes is a figure of international significance, whose life and work impacted fundamentally on the story of British imperialism in southern Africa in the late C19, and who was a philanthropist.
- Public statuary and civic monuments enjoyed a “golden age” in Queen Victoria’s reign; this a late example within fashion for commemoration.
- Provides local colour to city centre, adorning an unexceptional building.

**Cons**
- Rhodes’ contribution to Oxford is already celebrated in listings at Rhodes House and Oriel College, Oxford and his association is already noted in five other statutory designations in England.
• His habitation at 6 King Edward Street was short (one university term, 1881) and not linked to any particular contemporary achievement or action.
• Terraced tenement on which the plaque is mounted is not of special architectural or historic interest, a standard, unexceptional mid to later C19 design in stock brick.
• Interest confined to plaque, no supporting artistic fabric or sculptural set piece. The plaque does not contribute to a wider entity.
• Situated above ground in a relatively narrow street, the plaque is not prominent.
• Competent and pleasing design but not of high aesthetic or sculptural merit.
• Other more exceptional work by Whiting is protected, e.g. Letchworth War Memorial.
• An Edwardian example of the Victorian fashion for commemoration, post-dating the heyday with nothing particularly innovative about its design.

4 Who was consulted in the preparation of this report

4.1 Gill Grayson, Sarah Gibson, Posy Metz.

5 Appendices

5.1 Images of the plaque, 6 King Edward Street Oxford (below)
5.2 Listed bronze portrait plaques
Appendix 2: Listed bronze portrait plaques: some examples

1) Kensall Green Cemetery, London, 1879, on an obelisk (Grade II, 1989). List entry Number: 1227646

2) Monument to Sir Henry Bishop, East Finchley Cemetery, Barnet, c1860 (d 1855) (Grade II, 1983). List entry Number: 1263693
3) Dr Barnados Memorial, Ilford, London, by George Frampton, 1908 (Grade II*, 1979). List entry Number: 1081001

4) Tomb of Benjamin Collis, West Norwood Memorial Park, by G A Carter, 1878 (Grade II, 1981). List entry Number: 1357924

5) Memorial to J Creighton, Carlisle (part of civic cross), by Léon-Joseph Chavalliaud, 1896 (Grade II, 2012). List entry Number: 1408781

6) Memorial Drinking Fountain to Zachariah Green (and family) Titchfield Park, Hucknall, Nottinghamshire, 1898 (Grade II, 1988). List entry Number: 1234853
7) Clock and Drinking Fountain memorial to Sir William Houldsworth, Houldsworth Square, Stockport by J and H Patteson, 1920 (Grade II, 1975). List entry Number: 1162500