

Writer Russell Norris has strong views about heritage and identity

The past is relevant and I'm not a druid



Black? British? Roman? An actor in the Museum of London ponders the confusing heritage of a cosmopolitan world

What does national heritage mean to you? When you see a historical monument or site – or read about Romans and Anglo-Saxons – what do these sights and this knowledge actually mean to you? And what can this tell you about yourself and the society in which you live?

I am not an archaeologist, although I do hold a BA and a strong personal interest in the subject. I am a copywriter. I work in an industry that deals with deep-rooted sociological concepts like personal and cultural identity. Worryingly, for a distinct slice of the British populace, our nation's heritage is not a positive affirmation of who they feel they are: it is more so a cause for alienation. A 2000 MORI survey illustrated quite clearly that Black and Asian communities feel distanced from this country's past. When asked by this survey if she wanted to preserve buildings, sites and artefacts, one Black woman replied: "That is the white man's".

Think about this answer for a moment. Its implications are distressing.

Contemporary archaeological thought is seeking to address such

attitudes. An article in this magazine highlighted the discovery of a Roman garrison at Hadrian's Wall where a unit of North African Moors was once stationed (Roman wall: barrier or bond? Jul 2004). The site was heralded as a possible trigger for the dawn of a new era in Black British heritage – and considered sorely called for among ethnic minority groups struggling to find an affinity with British antiquity. This approach to the past has been called "utilitarian archaeology". I think it's a dangerous one.

I ask myself – and everyone – if archaeology can or should be used in this fashion. Should historical sites be sought out or championed to meet specific modern expectations? "Utilitarian archaeology" is a particularly foggy term. I would say that all forms of archaeology are utilitarian, in that they ultimately aim to be of use to everyone and not just attractive to the few. Utilitarianism is a doctrine whereby actions are considered correct if they are for the benefit of a majority. That is what our heritage is all about: the discovery and preservation of treasures that everyone can enjoy.

I also wonder if we should take it for granted that a person must share a direct racial link with the past in order to appreciate it as "relevant" history? It's often overlooked that the term "race" doesn't apply simply to a shared skin tone or physical characteristic: it also applies to a shared nation. I myself am half American and have Native American roots; but I was also born in Britain and am a citizen here. My dual background makes the heritage of the nation I live in no less relevant to my sense of who I am as a Briton.

Our country today is as diversely cosmopolitan as it was 2,000 years ago. The haphazard history of these islands stars a catalogue of different races – all of whom contributed to the cultural jigsaw that became "Britain". I do not feel a racial affinity with – say – Roman, Viking or Druid histories: but this does not diminish my interest in them, or stop me from engaging with them.

It is risky, I think, to approach such a broad concept as national heritage with a particular stratum of modern society in mind. In an ironic flip, "utilitarian archaeology" may end up undermining the very goal it seeks: social equality in historical representation.