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World Heritage Status (York)

12.30 pm

Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): Every MP is proud of his or her constituency, and I, like the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), am specially privileged to represent the city of York. As the new film "The King's Speech" puts King George VI very much in the public eye, let me remind Members that on a visit to the city, he said that the history of York was also a history of England. When I tell people that York is applying for UNESCO world heritage status, they often express surprise that York has not already achieved such a status. To see why, one just has to look at York's city walls, York Minster, which is the largest gothic cathedral in northern Europe and contains some 60% of our country's mediaeval stained glass, and the Roman Multangular tower that still stands 10 metres above the ground.

When I speak to people from abroad and tell them that I come from York, everyone, without exception, has heard of the city, and many have visited it in the way in which they have visited Florence, Athens or Jerusalem. York has an enormous international reputation, but I am afraid that that has made us complacent. Until a few years ago, we did not seriously think of applying to UNESCO for designation as a world heritage site, because we knew that we lived in one of the most precious gems in the western world and thought that nothing more needed to be said or done. I pay enormous tribute to Janet Hopton, who has led the campaign locally to seek world heritage designation for the city of York. I stress that it is a citizens' campaign; it is a campaign that has come not from politicians but from the people of York. None the less, the campaign has all-party support, and we will hear in this debate from the city's two Members of Parliament.

Over the past three years, I have worked with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister's predecessors, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge) and Barbara Follett, the former Member for Stevenage, to discuss how we in the UK can possibly get the door open again so that UNESCO will consider bids from cities such as York. I should like to thank the Department and the Minister's officials for their support over that period.

If York had applied for this status a decade ago, I am pretty certain that our application would have been accepted. Now, however, UNESCO understandably and rightly wants to see a balance in its world heritage list. There are already many great walled cathedral cities in this country and other countries on the list, and UNESCO has new ambitions. It may not accept an application for the built heritage of a city such as York. That has made us think more clearly about what is absolutely unique and irreplaceable about York, and we came to the conclusion that it is not what

is immediately apparent-the Roman, the Viking or mediaeval built heritage. It is not what is above ground, but what is still hidden underground.

York has been continuously inhabited as a city for 2,000 years. It is built at the confluence of two rivers, the Ouse and the Foss, which makes the ground waterlogged. Such unique anoxic conditions-conditions where the water prevents oxygen getting to objects buried in the ground-preserve centuries-old objects, which, in any other place, would have disintegrated. The water preserves organic material, such as wood, leather and textiles, that otherwise would simply rot away.

We have a Viking shoe and Viking cloth from the Jorvik dig. Wooden buildings from Jorvik can now be seen plank by plank, beam by beam, in the same way in which they would have been seen 1,000 years ago had they not been buried. Even the leftovers from meals are available for analysis. They tell us what people ate 1,000 years ago. There is nowhere else in western Europe with similar anoxic conditions. We know a lot about York from the excavations that have taken place, but only 2% of the ancient city has been excavated; 98% is fully preserved. That is what needs UNESCO's designation and protection.

If successful, York's bid would provide the only UNESCO world heritage site inscribed solely on the basis of its underground deposits. York's unique subterranean heritage is complemented by world-class archaeology in teaching, research, conservation and entrepreneurship. The university of York's department of archaeology is a centre of excellence in computing for archaeology and bio-archaeology through its environmental archaeology unit. The Council for British Archaeology, which promotes public engagement with archaeology, is a national body but is based in the city of York. The York Archaeological Trust is respected as one of the most successful archaeological trusts. It dug Coppergate 30 years ago and not only produced an incredible record of what life was like in Viking Jorvik but turned archaeology into a commercial success.

Some 17 million visitors have visited the Jorvik Viking centre since it opened in 1984, including the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair. I encourage the present Prime Minister and his family to come and join the many who have visited the Jorvik Viking centre, because I know that he visits north Yorkshire from time to time. The Archaeological Trust also runs the dig centre, which provides hands-on opportunities for young people to experience archaeology. There are also many other bodies based in York, such as the York Glaziers' Trust, English Heritage, the Civic Trust, the Georgian Society, the Mediaeval Guilds, the Archaeological Data Service and others. Between them, they create a culture of support for scientific study and conservation of this wonderful and great city, which the hon. Member for York Outer and I have the great privilege to represent.

This bid looks to York's future as well as its past. We receive 7 million visitors a year, who spend almost half a billion pounds in York, which sustains 20,000 people in employment. We have a visitor economy; people have come to the great cathedral city of the north of England for centuries. The only thing that we really miss in York is a good saint, with relics in the minster. World heritage status would protect and enhance the city's global reputation.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Just on the economic benefit that the hon. Gentleman describes, Skipton and Ripon has one of the other Yorkshire world heritage sites of Studley Royal and Fountains Abbey, and one cannot underestimate the huge benefits that such a status gives to the local economy. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his campaign and give it all my support. For Skipton and Ripon, it makes a huge difference and it would also make a huge difference to York.

Hugh Bayley: That is a very valuable, very kind and very important testimony, because there are some people who believe that world heritage status would act as an economic deadweight on the city and it is my very strongly held view—one shared by all the parties on the city council—that nothing could be further from the truth. Inappropriate development of buildings in York cannot, should not and will not take place whether or not the city gains world heritage status, because York has a duty to respond as if it had the status whether it wins it or not. Nevertheless, the increased international recognition and support that York could receive to preserve the heritage of the city as a result of designation would further benefit the visitor economy.

I should perhaps say how pleased I am to see other Members from Yorkshire here for this debate—the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) and the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney)—as well as my fellow representative of the city of York, the hon. Member for York Outer, all supporting the argument that I am making to the Minister.

I have a few questions to put to the Minister. I would like him to clarify for us the timetable for the decisions by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on the tentative list of bids for world heritage status. I ask him personally to read York's bid; I know that there are 38 bids, but I would like him to give a commitment to us during this debate that he will read York's bid. I want to tell him that he is welcome to visit York, to see what is being proposed and to discuss with some of the archaeology and heritage bodies in the city why the bid is so important. If he is not able to visit York but would like further briefing, we can arrange for people from the city to come and visit him down here in Westminster. I also want to ask him how many of the 38 applications he believes will end up on the tentative list and, finally, how many of those he would expect to receive approval from UNESCO and when.

Those are my questions to the Minister. I will sit down now, to leave a little time for the other Member for the city of York, the hon. Member for York Outer, to make his own contribution to the debate.

12.41 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Thank you very much, Mrs Riordan, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today.

I congratulate my neighbouring parliamentary colleague, the hon. Member for York Central (Hugh Bayley), on securing this very important debate for our great city of York and I warmly welcome his speech, which I know comes from a great depth of knowledge. We may represent different political parties, but I have no doubt that he shares my desire to serve our great city for the benefit of all its residents. Indeed, as he has already mentioned, this bid for world heritage

status has cross-party political support in the city, which is very important. It is vital that we put aside our tribal differences on this occasion and promote what is great about York and its bid for world heritage status, because a successful bid would be so important for the city.

Of course, I am aware that time is short in this debate and it is very important that we hear from the Minister and give him plenty of time to respond to the debate. The hon. Member for York Central has put some specific questions that I would also like to hear the answers to.

The hon. Gentleman has also outlined the background to York's bid and he made some very powerful arguments supporting the city's attempt to be placed on the tentative list for world heritage status. Indeed, I fully subscribe to all the points that have already been made in the debate. The hon. Gentleman talked about people within the city and visitors to the city who are surprised that York is not already on the list for world heritage status, and I share their view; I have had that same experience of people expressing surprise that York is not already on the list. That is a very important point to make in this debate.

In my opinion, York's outstanding range of archaeological gems is almost unprecedented in the United Kingdom. The city boasts Roman cemeteries, trading settlements and other deposits that can be traced as far back as the seventh century AD. However, thus far we have only scratched the surface. I know that the hon. Gentleman has already mentioned this point, but it is very important; local experts believe that only 2% of the city has been excavated so far, leaving 98% undiscovered. That is an important point that we must mention in this debate and in the wider context of the bidding process.

Indeed, it is the potential for further archaeological finds and breakthroughs that I find the most fascinating aspect of this whole process. Crucially, the bid is not solely reliant on the deposits that have already been discovered, although they are remarkably impressive. I am grateful to see so many of our regional colleagues here today, and Members who attended an earlier meeting will have seen some of those impressive artefacts. Nevertheless, we must also give great consideration to what we have not yet seen and what can potentially be discovered. In my view, we must ensure that a successful world heritage bid is not the end of the process but the beginning of a whole new chapter in the history of York and its archaeological finds. Building a legacy, rather than merely celebrating a legacy, is at the core of this bid.

The department of archaeology at the university of York is already recognised worldwide as a centre of excellence in the teaching of archaeology, and a successful bid would further boost interest and funding, ensuring that York remains a world leader when it comes to pioneering archaeological research.

The bid has attracted support from across the city. As I have already mentioned, there is cross-party support for it and again I want to say how grateful I am to see so many colleagues from the wider region here to support the bid today.

I also want to take this opportunity to praise the York world heritage steering group, which has led the bid with determination and vigour since 2006. We must pay tribute today to the group's determination to see this whole process through and the experience that it brings to the process.

For me, the potential benefits of a successful bid are countless. First, there are potential economic benefits, which are important. In the past, arguments have occasionally been made against the world heritage bid on the economic front, but I think that those arguments are invalid. On the economic front alone, it is estimated that 23,000 jobs would be safeguarded by a successful bid, with the potential for many more jobs to be created, which would further enhance York's vital tourism sector and contribute substantially to our local economy.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Hugh Bayley) on securing this wonderful debate. As a Member of Parliament for a west Yorkshire constituency and as someone who was born in north Yorkshire, I hold the subject of the debate very close to my heart. York is a wonderful city. We have already heard lots of wonderful facts about it. Personally, I love bringing my children to the National Railway museum; I love meandering down the Shambles; I like showing Australians around York Minster, and we all enjoyed Royal Ascot when it was held at York race course just a few years ago.

So I just want to stress that there is cross-party support across the region for this bid and I am very proud to be here today to support this application for York to receive world heritage status. Good luck to everybody here, and I hope that the Minister can take on board all our cross-party regional support for this bid.

Julian Sturdy: I thank my hon. Friend for those kind words. It is really important that we already have cross-party support for this bid, as well as regional support, because this process is not just about York; it is about the region too and York is a key city within our region. If it is successful, the bid can bring so much to the city of York and to our great region, benefiting the regional economy and particularly tourism. That is another important point to take away from this debate.

York truly is a beautiful city, set in God's own county. As a proud, born-and-bred Yorkshireman, I know that York's heritage is world-class; not only the archaeological side but, as has already been mentioned, the National Railway Museum and the Minster. I remember taking my children to the National Railway museum; indeed, I still take them. The city walls, the Minster - it really is a fantastic city.

It is a travesty that York is not already a world heritage site and its historical importance must be recognised. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to support York's bid, without compromising his position. I understand his position in the bidding process, but I urge him to do all he can to support the York bid as we enter what is undoubtedly a crucial phase. I look forward to hearing his comments on the bidding process.

12.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (John Penrose): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mrs Riordan, to look after us during this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Hugh Bayley) on securing it and being supported by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy)

and other MPs from the Yorkshire area. It is timely, given where we are in the process of assessing the various applications for world heritage site status, and it demonstrates strongly the widespread cross-party support that MPs have mentioned. It is reassuring to see such support not just in Parliament but, as I understand, at a local council and local government level. I am sure that it will underpin the bid's many strengths and help it dramatically.

I was thankful for a comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer at the end of his speech. He said-I hope that everybody here will understand this-that I will have to be a bit careful in my remarks, as I must not prejudice my position in advance of the independent report from the committee of experts currently considering the various applications. I hope that everyone here will understand that although I share many of hon. Members' views on the quality of York's bid, I must ensure that I take a decision after comparing it against what I am sure will be strong bids in the other applications. Although I agree enthusiastically with many of the points made about York's qualities, no one should take that as a prejudice in comparison to the strengths and weaknesses of other bids. Others out there will also be good.

From the UK's point of view, it is particularly important that we have as many high-quality bids as possible. As the hon. Member for York Central pointed out, world heritage organisations have become a great deal more choosy and careful about what kinds of application they are willing to accept, and are raising the bar. To paraphrase him, a large number of northern European cathedral cities, many of which are excellent, wonderful and fully deserving of their status, are world heritage sites. As York is not one of them already, it must distinguish itself in some other way, because there are many other deserving sites in other parts of the world that also deserve proper consideration. He was right to draw that to our collective attention.

The hon. Member for York Central asked whether I would like to visit York. I already have. I am delighted to say that after I became Minister with responsibility for heritage, I did an extensive tour of Yorkshire. I spent some time in York and had the opportunity to see some of the attractions and heritage features that he mentioned, both above and below ground. He is absolutely right: there are some amazing things to see, from the city walls to the minster. I was lucky enough to be shown around the minster, as well as to see stonemasons working on the very fine stonework, which must be replaced continually due to the effects of *anno domini* on an amazingly complex and old building.

I also visited the Yorkshire museum, where at one point I had the chance to stand on a Roman mosaic set into the floor. I must confess that I was slightly conflicted about doing so. Part of me was amazed and delighted to see such a beautiful piece of Roman mosaic, but standing on it somehow felt wrong. It is a wonderful piece of interactivity. I am told that school parties going through the museum love the chance to interact with an incredibly ancient piece of architecture. However, I also worried, standing on it, that future generations might have half a millimetre less of it to enjoy due to the wear and tear of feet going over it.

There is no doubt that York has plenty to see, much of it involving the city's amazing architecture. However, as both MPs for York have pointed out, it has a huge wealth of heritage that is almost certainly undiscovered; 98% is the figure commonly used. Clearly, therefore, this

is a great opportunity for more to be discovered and for continuing richness to be elaborated and shown to future generations.

The hon. Gentleman asked for more details about the process. I will summarise it briefly. In case I miss anything, I point out that we have put more details of the dates and timetable up on the Department for Culture, Media and Sport website; that should be happening about now. I am told that that information was on the DCMS website but, for some reason that no one can fathom, was taken down by accident recently. We are now putting that right, so more details will be available after this debate for anybody who wants to discover anything extra.

In broad terms, we have encouraged people to apply to be put on the new tentative list. We have received 38 extremely good and varied applications; I am delighted that we have had so many. Those applications are being considered by a panel of independent experts who are assessing them, weighing them up and comparing their relative merits. The panel is at work as we speak, and I expect it to report to me in March, when my officials and I will consider its report and decide on that basis.

The hon. Gentleman asked how many applications we are likely to put on the tentative list and how many applications on the tentative list are likely to be inscribed as world heritage sites. I am afraid that I cannot tell him, because that will depend partly on the report from the independent panel of experts. Clearly, the experts would not be very independent if I told them how many to choose; it will depend on their conclusions. We are allowed to propose only two individual sites from the tentative list for consideration in any given year. If we have a list of 20, we will put those 20 forward in a steady trickle rather than all at once. It will then be up to the world heritage organisation to decide which ones it wants to adopt. We cannot tell whether any will be successful. Obviously, I hope that as many as possible will be.

I will finish with a comment on the questions raised and certainties expressed by both Members for York about the benefits of world heritage status. I agree with both their comments. Some people worry that world heritage status might incur additional costs of one kind or another in increased heritage protection and preservation, or that it might stunt economic growth. I take a different view, as I think do most people. Particularly in places such as York, many entirely sensible measures necessary to preserve heritage are already in place. Little, if any, additional cost would be incurred.

Making it clear that a place is special and distinct adds to its aura and demonstrates that it is worth visiting and a wonderful place to live. It makes the place distinctive. It is not just a question of tourist pounds and dollars, although they are tremendously important for any local economy; it is also important from the point of view of the beauty and sense of a place, and what makes it distinctive, different and worth living in. Therefore, I argue that from a cultural, heritage and economic point of view, the benefits of being a world heritage site are tremendous for a location such as York, and for many other places as well.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I accept that point entirely. World heritage site status for York would undoubtedly boost its already fantastic tourism industry, but it could also have a knock-on effect in surrounding areas such as my neighbouring constituency. Selby has fantastic

gems, including two famous battlefields and a wonderful abbey, and it was the birthplace of a king of England. I support the bid, and I hope the Minister will take on board the wonderful representations made by the hon. Members from York.

John Penrose: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right that a halo effect can be expected from a world heritage site. I have no doubt that the benefits would knock on to other parts of Yorkshire as well.

My only point of difference is with the assertion by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer that Yorkshire is God's own county. As someone from Somerset, which of course has better beer and better cricket, I cannot let that go by. Other than that-I had better stop before I get lynched-I am delighted that there is such strong and cross-party support for what I am sure will be an excellent bid.