

Griff Rhys Jones is building on a firm foundation as he prepares to open the doors for a second time to BBC Two's major campaign and series, *Restoration*. Last year's first series cemented itself into public consciousness by presenting viewers with 30 at-risk buildings across the

get involved in a telethon,” declares Griff, “but these buildings do need money.

“There are two aspects,” he explains. “It’s a long game – you have to be prepared to take time. You also have to make your case adequately – you can’t just go to people and say, ‘Give us the money’, without actually proving many things, including your own sense of responsibility. But it can be done. So it isn’t just Heritage Lottery money, although that’s a big part of it.”

Griff describes fund-raising for threatened buildings as “a Sisyphean task” and he speaks with authority on becoming involved in preserving the nation’s heritage. Some six years ago he agreed to front the campaign to save Hackney Empire in East London, partly because he mistakenly thought he’d performed there. “Well, I knew I’d been there and seen lots of things there,” he smiles. He’s worked like a Trojan and, although there is still some work to do, the theatre re-opened in January this year, after a £17m labour of love.

It was his tireless work for this Edwardian treasure – its spotlight has shone on Marie Lloyd, Stan Laurel and Charlie Chaplin, followed, in more recent times, by Jo Brand, Ben Elton and Ralph Fiennes as Hamlet – which led to Griff’s involvement in *Restoration*.

He’s also cared passionately for a long time about buildings in general. “I’ve always liked to see imagination and care and thoughtfulness in buildings,” he explains. “I’ve always been worried by what I would call the Fascist tendency, which is a very 20th-century thing. We have to be a multicultural, pluralist society, where people have different views on use.” The Hackney Empire is a



everybody and if everybody was interested and involved in it, we would probably live in increasingly beautiful areas, which is why public involvement is so vital.”

Griff has two targets in his sights which he blames for despoiling the capital, in particular, and he fires off a round of verbal bullets.

“One of the messes in London is street signs,” he stresses. “Some traffic signs make no sense, they’re just stuck up where people think they might be of some help or no help at all. ‘The North’,” he barks, strongly emphasising each word. “What on earth does that mean in the middle of London? It’s just a piece of rubbish. And why, in the centre of London, in a conservation area, do they still allow developers to put up huge hoardings covered in advertisements which then stay there for 20 years?”

He immediately answers his own rhetorical questions: “Some of the laws about improving our environment are toothless. It’s often site owners who want to redevelop and can’t get planning permission for whatever they want to do, who hang on to a building for ever and ever. As Michael Heseltine said, the first thing that should happen is that people should be forced to sell a building if they don’t have a use for it, or if they are claiming they can’t do anything with it; it should go on the open market, because they won’t harm themselves to sell it.”

He continues: “I wouldn’t be allowed, and nor would you, to put advertising hoardings on the side of your house, but because it’s a sort of quasi building site, they apply, they get permission, they put them up.

“So individuals feel slightly powerless,” he adds. “They don’t quite understand why they should live in a shitty Britain.

“I do hope,” he says earnestly, “that we continue to be a reasonably campaigning programme.”

Viewers can obtain a free copy of the campaign pack, *How To Save An Historic Building*, by calling 08700 100 150 or by logging on to the website www.bbc.co.uk/restoration