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# A shell of its former self

## Is the National Trust being mismanaged?



Zewditu Gebreyohanes





**Cover:** Before and after of the Marble Hall at Clandon House: a Grade I-listed National Trust country house devastated by fire in 2015. The Trust's management has now decided that the house will be left as a burnt-out shell – ostensibly so that visitors can admire “the evocative spaces created by the fire”. Clandon is a powerful metaphor for the decline in standards within the National Trust, an organisation which is similarly a shell of its former self. Both Clandon and the Trust can be restored to their former glory, but only if there is a wholesale abandonment of the prevailing weak and anti-heritage rhetoric and mindset at the top of the charity.

***EXTRACT from the First Report on the Constitution of the “National Trust.”***

*“The governing object of the Trust, as set forth in the Memorandum of Association, is ‘**To promote the permanent preservation, for the benefit of the nation, of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest;** and as regards lands, to preserve (as far as practicable) their natural aspect, features, and animal and plant life; and for this purpose to accept, from private owners of property, gifts of places of interest or beauty, and to hold the lands, houses, and other property thus acquired, in trust for the use and enjoyment of the nation.’ **No lands or tenements of beauty or historic interest, given or bequeathed to or acquired by the Trust for the benefit of the nation, ‘shall,’** the Memorandum of Association declares, ‘**at any time, whether upon the winding up or dissolution of the Trust or otherwise, be sold or otherwise dealt with in a manner inconsistent with the object of the Trust,**’ thus the Association affords ample security for the permanent safe custody of all property committed to its care.”*

**Taken from the National Trust Report for the Year 1905–1906, p.58**

*“The uncertainties are many and varied, but the duty to safeguard and manage the Trust’s properties for future generations is clear. The Council will strive to fulfill that duty...”*

**Taken from the National Trust Annual Report 1973, p.17**

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# About the author



Zewditu Gebreyohanes is a Senior Researcher at the Prosperity Institute and Deputy Editor of the digital publication *History Reclaimed*. She sits on the board of the Victoria & Albert Museum and on the jury of Prix Pictet, an international photography award.

From May 2022 to November 2023 Zewditu was the Director of Restore Trust, the grassroots member-led campaign to return the National Trust to its founding aims and statutory and charitable objects. She was formerly Head of the History Matters unit at the think tank Policy Exchange, where her publications included *Protecting local heritage: How to bring democracy to the renaming of streets* and *Politicising Plants: Does “decolonising” the botanical collections at Kew undermine its core mission?*

Zewditu graduated from King’s College London in 2020 with a First in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Being half-British and half-Ethiopian, she is fluent in Amharic and proficient in Tigrinya.

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# Executive summary



The National Trust (hereafter “the Trust”) was established to conserve the heritage sites in its care in perpetuity for the enjoyment of the nation. However, in recent years the Trust’s management has been neglecting its principal duty, allowing historic houses, gardens, estates and landscapes across the country to deteriorate even as it diverts scarce time and resources to projects that do not fall within the charity’s core remit.

Grade I-listed Clandon House in Surrey, ravaged by fire in 2015, is the archetypal example of Trust neglect. Having received a £66.3 million insurance payout, the Trust’s management has decided to renege on its initial commitment to restore the house, announcing that it will instead keep the house in shell form with unsympathetic modernist additions. This decision has faced significant public opposition, with over twice as many comments objecting to the Trust’s planning applications as there have been comments in support.

Clandon provides a clear case study of the decline in standards and the change in attitude by the Trust towards the heritage assets in its care; when Uppark House in West Sussex was similarly devastated by fire in 1989, the Trust rebuilt it in just six years, whereas it has taken the current management over a decade to submit planning applications proposing to experiment with, rather than to restore, Clandon’s interior.

Sites from the Sherborne Estate in Gloucestershire to Grade I-listed Barrington Court in Somerset have been allowed to decay physically under the current management’s watch. While the Trust claims it has insufficient funds to fulfil its primary functions, this defence is undermined by the number of projects it has undertaken that are irrelevant to its core duties, such as “Blossom Watch” and the Castlefield Viaduct regeneration, taking place on land not even owned by the charity.

The Trust’s management has also been promoting controversial social justice agendas at the expense of essential conservation work. Houses and history have been reinterpreted – often by activists rather than specialist historians – through the lens of modern identity politics, with a particular focus on decolonisation and “LGBTQ+” themes.

Poor treatment of volunteers and the imposition of divisive edicts — such as compulsory wearing of rainbow lanyards and mandatory inclusion training — has alienated volunteers and led to an exodus. The marked decline in volunteer numbers, from 65,000 in 2018–19 to under 40,000 now (the lowest in over a decade), has impaired the Trust’s ability to fulfil its duties.

The Trust’s rhetoric, agenda and actions may have been heavily influenced by external sources of funding, such as research grants, government subsidies and corporate sponsors, as well as by its own commercial interests, such as rents, revenues and cost-cutting.



The Trust appears to tailor its research priorities and strategy to align with those of its potential funders, leading to involvement in projects that have little or nothing to do with heritage preservation but rather with advancing a particular agenda. The Trust's research collaboration with the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries – which actively encourages and supports “activist thinking and practice” – appears to be influential in helping steer the charity away from its statutory and charitable objects. Many of the Trust's identity politics-related projects – the “Colonial Countryside Project”, “Prejudice and Pride” and “Everywhere and Nowhere” initiatives, as well as the inclusivity training programmes for volunteers – were run directly by or in collaboration with the University of Leicester.

The Trust management's prioritisation of money as an end in itself – rather than as a means to an end of heritage conservation – has therefore led to the erosion of the charity's standards and reputation.

Even as it justifies the pursuit of well-funded “inclusivity” initiatives by arguing that doing so will help it fulfil Octavia Hill's vision of a Trust that is “for everyone”, the management has raised one of the only tangible barriers to entry for would-be visitors and members, by steadily increasing membership and entry prices. Over the past four years, the price of membership has increased by a third, from £72 for an individual adult and £126 for a family to £96 and £169, respectively. This is significantly higher than inflation in that period. The justification provided by the Trust's management to defend many of its controversial initiatives – that it is doing so to draw in new audiences and be more accessible – seems unconvincing in light of this.

There is widespread dissatisfaction from members and from the public about the way the Trust is being run. The National Trust's rating on Trustpilot is 2.1 (“Poor”), with 74% of respondents giving the Trust just one star out of five, while a competitor in the sector, English Heritage, has a Trustpilot rating of 4.5 (“Excellent”), with 76% giving it five stars.

Members have been leaving the Trust in large numbers, with the number of members falling from 5.95 million in 2021 to 5.38 million in 2024: even lower than during the pandemic. Membership retention has been identified by the Trustees as one of three “going concerns” posing “severe but plausible downside risks to National Trust operations”.

The Trust's lack of transparency has been a major factor in reducing trust among members. Among the opaquely-made decisions which have damaged the Trust's reputation was its Covid-19 “Reset” programme: the mass redundancies which took place as part of this resulted in a shortage of conservation specialists, further exacerbating the Trust's decline in standards. The lack of expertise is evidenced by poor custodianship such as at Killerton in Exeter, Devon, (with the improper use of cement mortar to repoint lime mortar); and at the Long Mynd in the Shropshire Hills (which has been harmed due to unsustainable heather brush harvesting).

The subversion of the Trust's mission has taken place because the management has concentrated its power by dismantling internal democracy – as explained in full in the prequel to this report, *National Distrust* (2024) – as well as other channels of accountability such as the regional committees and advisory panels.



Immediate action is required to prevent further erosion of the Trust's founding purposes and to restore its focus on preserving historic and natural heritage for the benefit of the nation.

To address these issues, this report proposes the following recommendations:

- 1. The Charity Commission should undertake a full audit of sites in the Trust's care and commission an independent governance review.**
- 2. The Charity Commission should set up an independent Ombudsman for the National Trust.**
- 3. National Trust officials should be brought before the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee to answer questions.**
- 4. State funding bodies should be reformed so that they do not provide financial incentives for conservation institutions to become derailed from their core missions.**

# Introduction



The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, more commonly known as the “National Trust” (hereafter also referred to as “the Trust”), was established in 1894 by three visionary social reformers and patrons of built and natural heritage: Sir Robert Hunter, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, and Octavia Hill.

The Trust's governing object was clearly defined by its founders, in its original Memorandum of Association, as being “To promote the permanent preservation, for the benefit of the nation, of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest; and as regards lands, to preserve (so far as practicable) their natural aspect, features, and animal and plant life”;<sup>1</sup> this mission later became enshrined in statute when the National Trust Act of Parliament came into force in 1907.<sup>2</sup> In 1962, when the Trust was transformed from a not-for-profit company into a charity, its charitable objects were – and remain – near-identically defined.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, despite the lack of ambiguity regarding the founding, statutory and charitable objects of the Trust, in recent years the organisation appears to have strayed from its duty and remit. This report interrogates the who, what, where, when, why and how of the Trust's erosion of mission, before recommending solutions to fix the problems both in the short and long term.

Chapter one of this report, “A veneer of virtue”, provides an overview of the ways in which the Trust has been failing to carry out its core functions, such as by neglecting sites in its care. This chapter draws on case studies from across the country to present evidence, including photographic evidence, that the Trust's management has been allowing Trust sites – particularly historic houses – to decay physically, and paving the way for long-term neglect by propagating rhetoric that undermines their importance and significance. Even as the Trust's management protests that it has insufficient funds and resources to enable it to discharge its legal obligations fully, it regularly finds the resources to go beyond its stated duties by embarking on irrelevant projects, many of which centre around the promotion of controversial and politicised agendas. While the report does not attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue of failings, it sheds light on a broad and representative range of issues. The highlighted case studies reflects the fact that the various problems are inextricably linked: most of the sites exhibit a combination of neglect of duty and straying away from the Trust's mission in overlapping ways.

Chapter two, “Follow the money”, focusses on the Trust leadership's apparent motives for straying away from the Trust's remit. It proposes that the charity's deviation from its purposes is primarily the result of an increasingly commercialised and profit-driven approach, against the Trust's

| 1 *National Trust Report for the Year 1905–1906*. p.58.

| 2 *The National Trust Acts 1907 – 1971, as varied by a Parliamentary Scheme implemented by The Charities (National Trust) Order 2005 and incorporating amendments made by the Commons Act 2006*. Available online at <[https:// nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/the-national-trust-acts-1907-1971.pdf](https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/the-national-trust-acts-1907-1971.pdf)> [Accessed on 13 December 2023] p.3.

| 3 Charity Commission for England and Wales. *The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty: Governance*. Available online at <<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/205846/governing-document>> [Accessed on 16 December 2023].

founding charitable ethos. The evidence suggests that the general lack of interest in traditional heritage preservation which can be seen in the case studies can be ascribed to an overriding concern about making money.

Chapter three, "Power without accountability", explains what has happened to the Trust's purpose. Drawing on the research and conclusions from the prequel to this report, *National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust*,<sup>4</sup> this section shows how the Trust's leadership has reduced internal accountability by undermining democracy to such an extent that members' resolutions or Council candidates critical of the existing management are unlikely to succeed. With few meaningfully functioning channels of internal or external scrutiny, a highly bureaucratised and authoritarian form of governance has enabled a lurch towards an ultra-commercialised approach which is not in keeping with the Trust's charitable status and ethos.

The report concludes by offering recommendations for how the National Trust's reputation and credibility can be restored and for how members and the public can hold the Trust's leadership to account. If the Trust is to return to its proper vision and purpose, as outlined in its founding, statutory and charitable objects, intervention by the two bodies with oversight of the charity – Parliament and the Charity Commission (the charity regulator) – will be critical. A reinstatement of long-serving experts and figures with qualifications, interest and expertise in heritage preservation, particularly to more senior positions in the Trust, will be vital to reverse some of the damage done, and to prevent any further attempts to erode the charity's purpose. Finally, a truly long-term solution will require wholesale governance reform, for proper accountability for decision-making in future.

| 4 Gebreyohanes, Z., 2024. "National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust". *Legatum Institute*.

# 1. For everyone forever?



The National Trust was set up to be a custodian of the nation's heritage. Today, it owns and manages over 500 historic sites, including country houses, castles, gardens and parks, as well as almost 260,000 hectares of land and 896 miles of coastline.<sup>5</sup> However, this chapter shows that the Trust has been neglecting its core duty of maintaining and conserving heritage. Instead, it has been diverting scarce time and energy to other projects, such as imposing inappropriate and intrusive interventions that damage the authenticity and integrity of the sites in care. This chapter presents examples of dereliction of duty, including the physical decay of heritage, the full or partial closure of properties, the removal of items from display and the undertaking of irrelevant activities.

## a) Physical decline: decay and deterioration

In recent years, the Trust has been failing to fulfil its core mission of "permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest", as evidenced by the deteriorating condition of some of the historic buildings and land in its care.

### i. Neglect of properties

The most infamous case study which illustrates the dereliction of duty by the Trust's management is its neglect of Clandon House: a Grade I-listed Palladian country house in Surrey, which in April 2015 was ravaged by a fire that destroyed much of its magnificent interiors.<sup>6</sup> As one of only five surviving buildings in England designed by the architect Giacomo Leoni, and noted for its elaborate stucco ceilings, Clandon's destruction represented a significant loss of heritage. The Trust's initial pledge was to undertake the "biggest conservation project in a generation" by restoring the state rooms: the Marble Hall, Speakers' Parlour and Saloon.<sup>7</sup> In a now-deleted blog from January 2016, the then Director-General of the National Trust, Helen Ghosh, wrote that "Given their historical and cultural significance, and the fact so many original features have survived, we believe we should restore the magnificent state rooms on the ground floor; the most

5 *National Trust Annual Report 2023–24*, pp.10, 27.

6 The subsequent Fire Investigation Report undertaken by the Surrey Fire and Rescue Service showed that the fire was able to spread so quickly because of the lack of "adequate fire compartmentation" between the distribution board and ceiling recesses; the report noted that the National Trust had been informed about this area for improvement in 2010 but had failed to act on it.

7 Fulcher, M., 2016. "National Trust announces Clandon Park restoration contest". *Architects' Journal*, 25 January. Available online at: <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/national-trust-announces-clandon-park-restoration-contest>> [Accessed 21 June 2024].

architecturally important and beautiful rooms”.<sup>8</sup> She also said that “we now know more about the original layout and recognise that the enduring significance of the house is its architecture and so we would like to return it to the 18th century design – making it a purer, more faithful version of Clandon as it was when it was first built”.<sup>9</sup>

However, in July 2022 – following the insurance payout of £66.3 million – the Trust’s management, now with Hilary McGrady in charge as Director-General, announced a radically different new plan for Clandon, saying that, “We are proud to share our new plans for Clandon with you today. Clandon is a great house laid bare, offering an extraordinary X ray of how a country house is made. We’re going to carefully conserve the house in its fire-damage [sic] state, with new roof access, illuminating roof lights and suspended walkways through the house” (see Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> A now-deleted press release by the Trust about its new plans for Clandon referred to its hope that visitors would be able to enjoy “the evocative spaces created by the fire” and “the poetic grandeur of a great house laid bare”.<sup>11</sup> The Trust website even appeared to celebrate the fire, “The loss of most floors has removed the physical barriers of a typical ‘upstairs/downstairs’ organisation of space by social class and created open spaces that contain both the formally grand rooms of the wealthy Onslow family and the smaller, simpler rooms of their servants”.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1:** Mock-ups of proposed modernist changes to Clandon House’s interior.<sup>13</sup>



One of the arguments the Trust’s management has used to justify the abandonment of its original

8 National Trust, 2016. *A new life for Clandon*. 18 January. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/news/a-new-life-for-clandon>> [Accessed 11 September 2022]. Now accessible via the WayBackMachine at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160322132049/https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/news/a-new-life-for-clandon>>

9 Furness, H., 2016. “Clandon Park fire: National Trust to restore stately home in ‘biggest project in a generation’”. *The Telegraph*, 18 January. Available online at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/12105182/Clandon-Park-fire-National-Trust-to-restore-stately-home.html>> [Accessed 5 August 2024].

10 ClandonParkNT, 2022. Instagram post. Available online at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CfqTS-nj0A5/>> [Accessed 4 August 2023].

11 Gebreyohanes, Z., Prins, G., Boys Smith, N., and Boyle, C., 2022. *Open letter to Rene Olivieri on Clandon House*. Available online at: <<https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/open-letter-to-national-trust-chairman>> [Accessed 1 October 2023].

12 National Trust. *Why Clandon Park is important*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/surrey/clandon-park/why-clandon-park-is-important>> [Accessed 2 December 2024].

13 Allies and Morrison, 2024 (taken from planning documents).

pledge is that the remnants from the fire are insufficient for a faithful restoration of Clandon's interior. In 2022, Kent Rawlinson, the Project Director at Clandon, stated in a now-deleted blog that "given the scale of the internal loss, we'd essentially be creating replica spaces or decorative schemes, rather than restoring surviving fabric".<sup>14</sup> It is not clear, however, how the management arrived at this conclusion in 2022 having categorically stated the opposite for several years.

The Trust's management has not revealed what new information came to light since 2019 to result in it reneging on the promise it made to the public in 2016. In addition to the declaration by Ghosh that "the fact so many original features have survived" would allow restoration of Clandon's ground floor rooms, Sophie Chessum – then Project Curator and Salvage Lead at Clandon – had stated in April 2016, a year after the fire, that "we certainly have enough there [in the Marble Hall] to be able to reconstruct those ceilings and really bring back those kind of glorious interiors".<sup>15</sup> In a 2017 post on the Trust website, now deleted, Chessum had written that "we have thousands of plaster fragments from the Marble Hall and from the other significant plaster ceilings in the house and we're gradually able to assess what has survived [...] there is certainly enough of the wonderful historic sculpture to reconstruct these beautiful, ornate ceilings".<sup>16</sup> This diagnosis followed nine months of "look[ing] carefully at the architectural significance of what had survived the fire, the items salvaged from the building and what was technically possible within it", so cannot simply be dismissed as a mistaken early judgement.<sup>17</sup> In spite of her prominent role at Clandon at such a crucial time, all mention of Chessum – whose statements are contradicted by the current management's denial of its ability to restore Clandon – has since been removed from the Trust's website.

As recently as 2019, the National Trust's management was still showing a clear commitment to its initial promise; upon taking up his new role as Project Director at Clandon, Kent Rawlinson himself said that "The Trust's vision for Clandon is restoring the most important spaces within the building, so really bringing them back to be as magnificent and sumptuous as they were, especially the iconic plasterwork piece at the centre".<sup>18</sup> The contrast between the use of the phrase "magnificent and sumptuous" and the current minimalist rhetoric – "laid bare", "skeleton", "fire-damaged" – which seems perversely to celebrate the destruction of Clandon, could not be more stark.

It is perhaps surprising that as a heritage charity the National Trust has not seen, or perhaps has chosen to overlook for reasons of expediency or general lack of interest,<sup>19</sup> the silver lining of

14 Rawlinson, K., 2022. "Celebrating a new chapter for Clandon". *National Trust*, 22 August. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/blogs/curators-blog/celebrating-a-new-chapter-for-clandon>> [Accessed 11 September 2022]. Now accessible at: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20221004165417/https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/blogs/curators-blog/celebrating-a-new-chapter-for-clandon>>

15 London and South East National Trust, 2016. *Clandon Park's Marble Hall Ceiling*. [Video] 14 April. Available online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o0MOEtUxKA>> [accessed 1 September 2024].

16 Chessum, S., 2017. "Clandon Park's Marble Hall ceiling". *National Trust*, 6 October. Online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/clandon-park/features/clandon-parks-marble-hall-ceiling>> [Accessed 11 September 2022]. Now accessible at: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20220811091514/https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/clandon-park/features/clandon-parks-marble-hall-ceiling>>

17 Royal Oak Foundation, 2016. *National Trust Reveals Bold Plans to Breathe New Life into Clandon Park*. 26 January. Available online at: <<https://www.royal-oak.org/2016/01/26/national-trust-reveals-bold-plans-to-breathe-new-life-into-clandon-park/>> [Accessed 23 July 2024].

18 Clandon Park National Trust, 2019. *Meet Project Director, Kent Rawlinson, at Clandon Park*. [Video online] 22 May. Available online at: <[https://www.facebook.com/223432794437944/videos/1624933297651210?\\_\\_so\\_\\_=permalink](https://www.facebook.com/223432794437944/videos/1624933297651210?__so__=permalink)> [Accessed 21 September 2024].

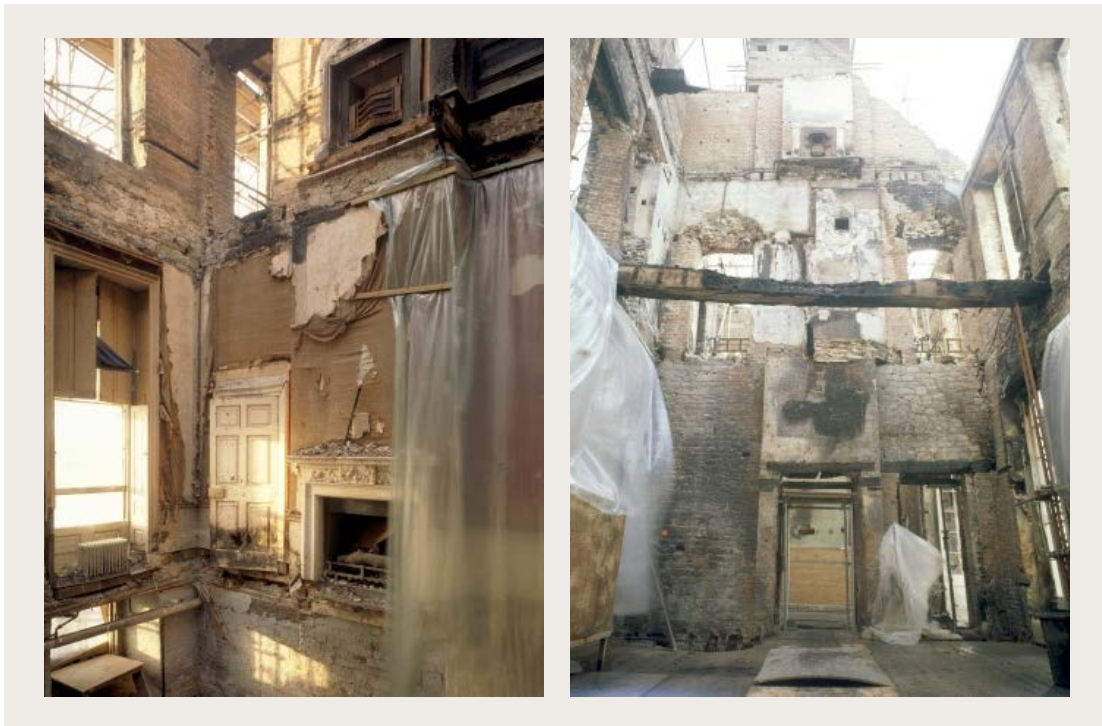
19 In 2016 the then Director-General Helen Ghosh had noted that a restoration project would "enable us to draw on the wealth of expertise within the Trust and beyond to utilise and develop traditional skills which are in grave danger of being lost".



such a tragedy: that the reinstatement of Clandon's interior would provide a rare opportunity for traditional craftsmen to utilise their skills on a large scale, as well as for the training of the next generation of artisans in crafts such as decorative plasterwork. A large-scale interior restoration would be the perfect way for the Trust "to promote the preservation of [...] buildings of beauty or historic interest", in line with its founding, statutory and charitable purposes.

The Trust management's rejection of the idea of a restoration on the grounds that the outcome would be a mere "replica" appears disingenuous, given that it is common practice to reconstruct significant works of architecture following a fire, even a devastating one. Countless buildings and interiors – from La Fenice Opera House in Venice to Windsor Castle – have been recreated after suffering significant or even complete fire damage, while all over Europe, buildings and interiors were reinstated after wartime bombing. The Würzburg Residence in Germany – including the ceiling frescoes – was reconstructed after World War Two. So was the Frauenkirche (the Church of Our Lady) in Dresden, from mere photographs and all the way down to the intricately carved oak doors. Few, if any, conservation figures have argued that they would have been better left as ruins.

**Figure 2:** *The interior of Uppark House immediately after the fire.*



More pertinently, the current Trust management's proposed plans for Clandon represent a clear departure from the Trust's own approach in previous cases of major fires. The Assembly Rooms in Bath, which were the venue for the Trust's AGM in 2022, were gutted by a bomb in 1942 and re-opened to the public again in 1962 after restoration. Another example is Uppark House in West Sussex: following a catastrophic fire in 1989, the Trust committed to and executed a restoration job – including the lime plaster stucco ceilings – which saw the house brought back to its former glory, as can be seen by comparing Figures 2 and 3. There is no outward indication, to the unsuspecting visitor, that either house is what the Trust's current management would disparage as a "replica", great care having been taken to make the work as authentic as possible. It is rare to



hear Windsor Castle called a replica.

**Figure 3:** The interior of Uppark House after restoration.



As reported in a *New York Times* article aptly named "Preserving Britain's Heritage":<sup>20</sup>

*The fire that swept through the magnificent 17th-century house of Uppark in the summer of 1989 gutted whole wings, destroyed or badly damaged many of Uppark's priceless possessions, and left the house smoldering and close to ruin. The question was, what to do next?*

*For the National Trust, which had owned Uppark since 1954, the answer was simple. The organization, a private charity that began humbly and is now one of the most powerful institutions in Britain, decided to restore the house to its exact condition on the day before the fire. Among other things, that meant hiring dozens of highly specialized craftsmen and women to painstakingly recreate the originals, from the 1800 hand-knotted English Axminster carpet in a ground-floor drawing room, to the delicately crafted wrought-iron sconces in the saloon, to the red silk damask curtains in the small parlor.*

*Six years and \$32,000,000, later, calculated at \$1.6 to the pound (the house was covered by fire insurance), the restoration is finished, and the trust is marking the reopening of Uppark on June 1 as one of the high points in a year of celebration to commemorate the organization's own 100th anniversary.*

At the time of the Uppark fire, the answer to the question of "what to do next" was "simple": "to restore the house to its exact condition on the day before the fire".<sup>21</sup> It took just six years to achieve

<sup>20</sup> Lyall, S., 1995. "Preserving Britain's heritage". *The New York Times*, 28 May. Available online at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/05/28/travel/preserving-britain-s-heritage.html>> [Accessed 4 June 2024].

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

this. By comparison, it has been almost a decade since the fire at Clandon, yet the interior looks little different. In less time than it took to decide that Clandon should not be restored, Uppark was successfully rebuilt. The difference between the Trust management's attitude at the time of Uppark – with Sir Angus Stirling as Director-General – and that today is stark and a clear sign of slipping standards, not only in terms of physical management but also of ideological decline in that it evidences an abandonment of the idea of country houses as important things to be preserved and looked after.

This notion is also supported by the fact that the Trust appears not to care about the consequences of its actions for other historic houses across the country. It would be reasonable to expect the Trust – as the biggest conservation charity in the country, and indeed in Europe – to be setting a positive example to other custodians of heritage, as it used to do. Yet its decision not to spend insurance monies as they were intended and instead to experiment with the interior of a Grade I-listed house sets a dangerous precedent.

Andrew Gimson, an author and historian who stood for the Trust's Council in 2023, wrote of receiving the impression that the Trust's leadership would have preferred it if Clandon had burned down in its entirety:

*The essential question is whether one loves what has been destroyed. If one does love it, one moves heaven and earth to rebuild it. If not, one talks in an evasive way, as [Sandy] Nairne did, of “new stories to be presented”.*

*I happen recently to have visited Clandon, the garden neglected, the house a melancholy sight, shrouded in scaffolding and white sheeting, surrounded by hoardings which talk in an evasive way about “our vision for Clandon’s future”, but leave one without any clear idea of what that vision is.*

*On arriving at the AGM in Swindon, I found myself talking over coffee with a senior NT manager who lamented that the fire had only half destroyed Clandon, which made the decision about what to do next more difficult.<sup>22</sup>*

The Trust's approach towards Clandon is demonstrably unpopular among members. At the 2023 AGM, a members' resolution for the restoration of Clandon House, calling for “not only conservation and roofing of the fire-gutted shell but also, as an absolute minimum, the restoration and recreation of the Marble Hall, with the restoration of other important interiors as funds allow”, had over 49,000 votes cast in favour.<sup>23</sup> While votes against were officially recorded as 74,298, these included almost 55,000 Quick Votes, automatically cast in line with the Trust leadership's recommendations, meaning fewer than 20,000 votes were actively cast against the restoration of Clandon (see chapter three, section a).<sup>24</sup> Opposition to the Trust's recommendations is not limited to members, but also comes from locals and members of the wider public. The Trust's two requests for planning permission in relation to its controversial plans for Clandon – submitted to Guildford Borough Council on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2024, almost a decade after the fire – received over

22 Gimson, A., 2023. “Why I stood for election to the National Trust's council and what can be learned from the results”. *Conservative-Home*. Available online at: <<https://conservativehome.com/2023/11/14/andrew-gimson-why-i-stood-for-election-to-the-national-trusts-council-and-what-can-be-learned-from-the-results/>> [Accessed 20 August 2024], emphasis added.

23 Gebreyohanes, Z., 2024. “National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust”. *Legatum Institute*, p.24.

24 *Ibid.*

twice as many objections as supporting comments from the public.<sup>25</sup>

While Clandon is perhaps the most egregious example of neglect by the Trust's management, there are many other examples of properties suffering from physical deterioration. Some properties are only partly affected, such as Fenton House with its damp-affected ceiling and flaking window frame paint (see Figure 4), and Lyme in Cheshire with its peeling ceiling paint (see Figure 5).

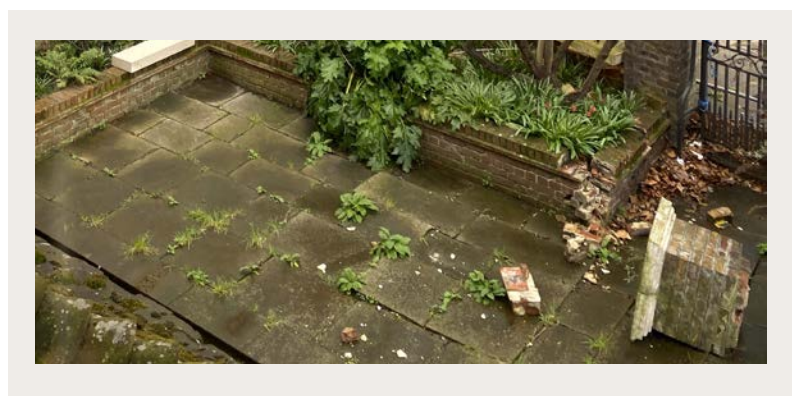
**Figure 4:** *Deterioration at Fenton House.*

**Figure 5:** *Peeling ceiling paint at Lyme.*



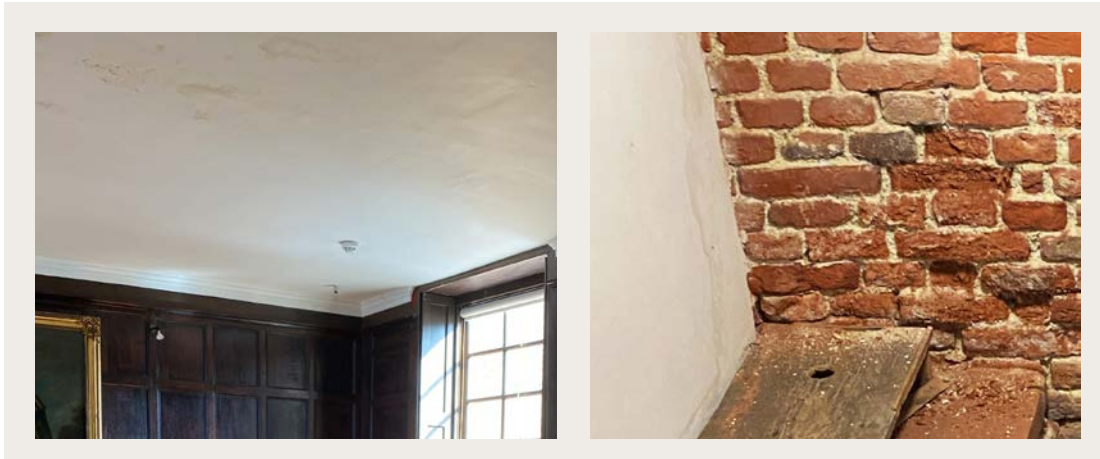
At Sutton House in London, the top of the main brick gate pillar, broken off, lay in the courtyard (see Figure 6), even as "Colonial Countryside" projects (see section c, part i of this chapter) and contemporary art installations were being prioritised. As Figure 7 shows, the house has been affected by damp, with ceilings in disrepair and the brick crumbling in places.

**Figure 6:** *Toppled gate pillar in courtyard of Sutton House.*



25 Guildford Borough Council, 2024. *24/P/01681 Planning – Application Comments*. Available online at: <[https://publicaccess.guildford.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=neighbourComments&keyVal=\\_GUILD\\_DCAPR\\_208882](https://publicaccess.guildford.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=neighbourComments&keyVal=_GUILD_DCAPR_208882)> [Accessed 24 March 2024]; Guildford Borough Council, 2024. *24/P/01682 Planning – Application Comments*. Available online at: <[https://publicaccess.guildford.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=makeComment&keyVal=\\_GUILD\\_DCAPR\\_208883](https://publicaccess.guildford.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=makeComment&keyVal=_GUILD_DCAPR_208883)> [Accessed 24 March 2024].

**Figure 7:** Damp-affected ceiling and interior brickwork at Sutton House.



Some buildings in the Trust's custodianship are in such advanced states of dereliction that they have been closed off entirely to the public. One example is Grade I-listed Barrington Court in Somerset, which has been closed since the pandemic (see Figure 8). The Trust closed the property to the public in 2020, but while this was only intended to be until the roof was repaired, this was delayed first due to the pandemic and then seemingly indefinitely as the property has still not re-opened over four years later. The sign which was installed outside – titled “A special time for Barrington” – states that “We are undertaking significant work as part of our commitment to conservation [...] As it is in the early stages, you may not see visible work happening during your visit [...] Options for the work are being developed” (see Figure 8). However, the claim about “significant work” being undertaken does not appear to be supported by the “Project updates” timeline on the Trust's website, which centres on surveys, assessments and investigations.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the lack of proper, sustained management over this time has meant that the house is now affected by severe water penetration and internal damage.<sup>27</sup>

The greenhouse at Barrington, last restored in 2004, has also since been allowed to deteriorate (see Figure 9). When the Trust sought to acquire Barrington at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it pointed out that “Unfortunately there is great danger of its decay, unless Barrington passes into the hands of careful owners”, and it was on this basis that it urged supporters to raise the necessary funds to facilitate the transfer.<sup>28</sup> It would appear that the Trust's current management has presided over Barrington's decay rather than carrying out the original aim of carefully preventing this. That this may be part of a deliberate strategy for the future for Barrington is implied in the Trust's statement that “Options for the work are being developed”, given that with a different mindset the only option would simply be to restore and conserve the building.

<sup>26</sup> National Trust, 2024. *Barrington Court Revival*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/somerset/barrington-court/barrington-roof-project>> [Accessed 13 December 2024].

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *National Trust Annual Report, 1905–06*. p.7.



**Figure 8:** Barrington Court in Somerset, with a close-up of the sign in front of the closed entrance.



## A special time for Barrington

**You're visiting Barrington Court at a crucial moment. We are undertaking significant work as part of our commitment to conservation.**

Weather conditions have caused damage to the roofs in recent years. We have therefore embarked on a multi-million pound project to repair the roofs, to revive Barrington Court and preserve it for years to come.

This project will take several years. As it is in the early stages, you may not see visible work happening during your visit. Much has been going on behind the scenes to further understand the buildings and how to approach the conservation and repair. Options for the work are being developed.

This means that today both houses are closed, and we're very grateful for your understanding. If you would like more information on the project's progress, please visit our website.



Original work on the roof at Court House, early 20th-century. From the National Trust Photographic Record.

Follow progress on our website, or scan the code



**Figure 9:** The deteriorated greenhouse at Barrington Court.



Another National Trust property at a particularly advanced stage of neglect is the dilapidated Grade II-listed Wool House Barn in Loose, Kent, which has been left covered in scaffolding for years (see Figure 10).<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 10:** Wool House Barn in Kent.<sup>30</sup>



Grade II-listed Half Moon House in the village of Manaton in Dartmoor provides another case of dereliction of duty. Acquired by the Trust in 2017, it was left to stand empty for several years, causing the thatch roof to deteriorate significantly.<sup>31</sup> In 2021 it was wrapped in protective plastic sheeting, to the ire of locals; the Trust management claimed at the time that this was simply a temporary measure as plans to “carry out essential repair work in 2020, including to re-thatch and make the building watertight, had to be put on hold” due to the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> However, in 2024 the new intentions of the Trust’s management were revealed when the property was put on the market for £1 million, with Strutt & Parker’s advertisement stating that “the property was rethatched in 2023 but otherwise is in need of full renovation”.<sup>33</sup> This is yet another example of a lack of interest in carrying out conservation works itself when this is avoidable, with a significant time-lag following flurries of local interest before any controversial action – such as selling off – is taken.

At other properties, the Trust has ended or limited public access – going against its statutory and charitable obligations – in order to enable conversion to profitable holiday lets. One example is Kymin Round House, the Trust’s first Welsh property, where in 2020 the two erstwhile Trust-employed custodians were informed, to backlash from locals, that they would be turned out of

29 Smith, A., 2023. “Listed National Trust barn in Loose described as ‘eyesore and a danger’”. *Kent Online*, 10 January. Available online at: <<https://www.kentonline.co.uk/maidstone/news/safety-fears-at-dangerous-national-trust-site-280183/>> [Accessed 8 February 2024].

30 *Ibid.*

31 Smith, C., 2021. “Anger over ancient building wrapped in ‘cling film’ by National Trust”. *DevonLive*, 19 February. Available online at: <<https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/anger-over-ancient-building-wrapped-5019295>> [3 June 2024].

32 *Ibid.*

33 Strutt & Parker, 2024. *Manaton*. Available online at: <<https://www.struttandparker.com/properties/manaton-5>> [Accessed 14 November 2024].

the house and made redundant.<sup>34</sup> At the time, the Trust's management claimed it was "talking to local partners to find a sustainable long-term future for the site" and promised that it would "continue to be protected for everyone, forever".<sup>35</sup> Yet just two years later, the Trust unveiled plans to convert Kymin into a holiday let.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, in East Devon the Trust's management decided to turn Shute Barton, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Medieval manor house, into a holiday let, opened to the public and members on only four weekends throughout the year.<sup>37</sup>

### The leaked "mansion report" and "Reset" documents

Further evidence of the Trust's declining interest in the buildings and collections in its care is provided in the leaked report from May 2020 outlining the National Trust's "10-Year Vision for Places and Experiences" (hereafter the "mansion report"), which provides an insight into the attitude of those running the Trust in relation to historic houses. The document<sup>38</sup> laments the Trust's "Outdated mansion experience: [...] fundamentally unchanged since the 1980s, serving a loyal but (by 2030)<sup>39</sup> dwindling audience and enabled by a loyal but dwindling volunteer base".<sup>40</sup>

A page with the heading "Mansions – from evolution to revolution" begins thus: "The changes we'll need in our built places are revolutionary, not evolutionary. We won't get there by encouraging local innovation and gradual scaling of good ideas, which is how we've approached this up to now".<sup>41</sup> This statement alone is a direct endorsement of radical top-down change and knee-jerk reaction in the place of a cautious, organic, results-based approach. For a senior National Trust official – which the now-retired author, Tony Berry, was at the time; to posit that the organisation will not get where it wants "by encouraging local innovation and gradual scaling of good ideas"<sup>42</sup> seems perverse. The implication is that the views of members, volunteers and locals should be disregarded, while Trust managers enact top-down sweeping revamps that change the character of places permanently.

Berry lists, as one of the four "first steps" the Trust must take towards achieving this aim, "A major change in collections presentation and storage: without this we'll be unable to flex our mansion offer to create the more active, fun and useful experiences that our audiences will be looking for in future".<sup>43</sup> What is meant by "flex our mansion offer" or indeed what "more active, fun and useful experiences" could entail in practice is not clear. The use throughout the document of the word "mansion" in place of "country house" is in itself an indication of the author's lack of experience in the field of built heritage, and illustrates the trickle-down effect of senior individuals' lack of

34 BBC, 2020. *Covid-19 forces closure of National Trust's Kymin Round House*. Available online at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-54891091>> [Accessed 17 June 2024].

35 *Ibid.*

36 Monmouthshire Beacon, 2022. *Trust unveils holiday let plan for Round House*. Available online at: <<https://www.monmouthshire-beacon.co.uk/news/trust-unveils-holiday-let-plan-for-round-house-545626>> [Accessed 17 June 2024].

37 Parkman, C., 2021. "Villagers devastated at National Trust plan to close medieval manor house Shute Barton". *DevonLive*, 24 February. Available online at: <<https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/villagers-devastated-national-trust-plan-5041375>> [Accessed 23 March 2024].

38 Berry, T., 2020. *National Trust: Towards a 10-Year Vision for Places & Experiences*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a3e3bb411b976850808785/t/6515626035b94f1fe996da72/1695900260653/A+10-yr+vision+for+Places+and+Experiences+%28v2.1%29.pdf>> [Accessed 14 October 2024]. p.5.

39 It is not clear why "(by 2030)" has been included in this sentence.

40 The very use of the word "mansion" to describe country houses reflects the unfamiliarity of its author with the subject matter and sector, and the unapologetically dismissive attitude towards dedicated members and volunteers is striking.

41 *Ibid.*, p.17.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*



expertise in the Trust's broader work, as evidenced by signs at Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire (see Figure 11) mentioning the "Mansion".

**Figure 11:** Signs at Shugborough Hall.



The Trust's management was quick to proffer, in the wake of the report's publication and in response to the immediate backlash to, that this was merely an internal draft document and that this did not necessarily outline the approach the organisation would take.<sup>44</sup> However, Berry, who had decades of experience working in PR and marketing, held a very senior position within the Trust as the Visitor Experience Director, as the following description of him – written the year before the leaked report came out – shows:

*"Tony Berry has been with the National Trust since the early 1990s, working regionally and nationally in PR, marketing, commercial development and learning. As Visitor Experience Director, he's now responsible for the strategic direction of the Trust's visitor-facing operations."*<sup>45</sup>

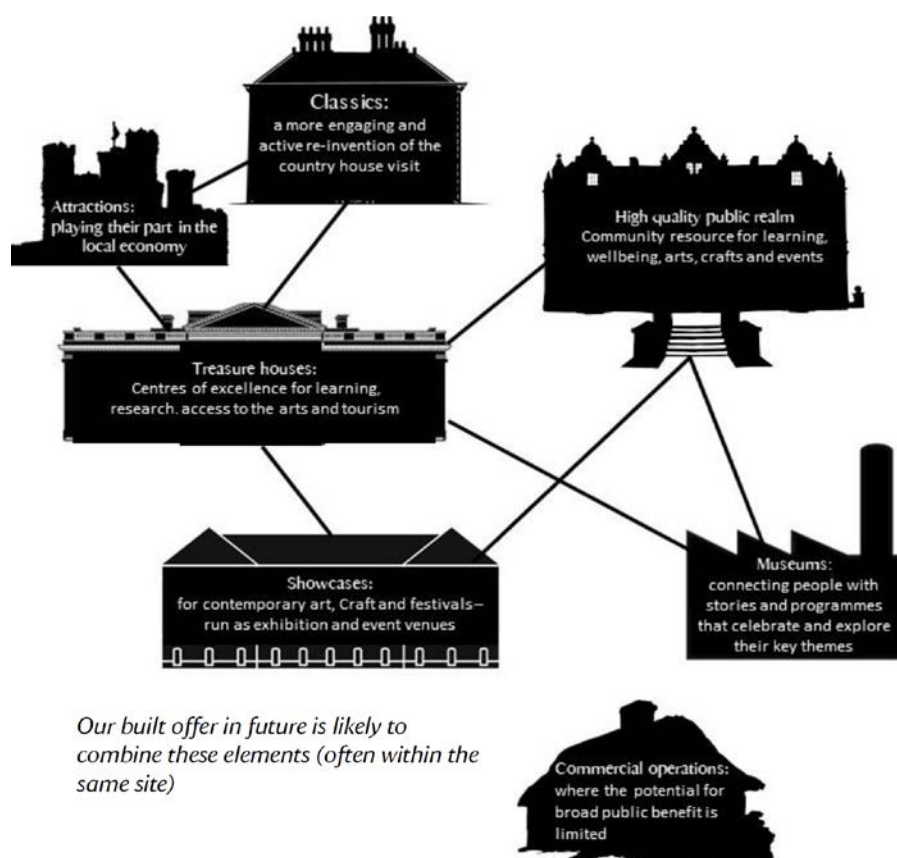
As such, at the time of the report's release it was arguably its author, as the individual specifically tasked with determining the "strategic direction" of the Trust, who out of all those working in the organisation would have been best placed to shine a light on this subject with authority. What he has written can therefore legitimately be seen as providing a good indication of planned Trust policy at the time, not least since the document – even if, as claimed, still technically only a draft – had evidently gone through a few iterations given that the leaked copy was "Version 2.1".

**Figure 12:** The Trust's proposed differentiation of country houses as outlined in the leaked mansion report.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Grosvenor, B., 2020. "Inside the National Trust's Beeching Plan". *Art History News*, 24 August. Available online at: <[https://www.arthistorynews.com/articles/5685\\_Inside\\_the\\_National\\_Trusts\\_Beeching\\_Plan](https://www.arthistorynews.com/articles/5685_Inside_the_National_Trusts_Beeching_Plan)> [Accessed on 4 August 2024].

<sup>45</sup> Nixon, A., 2019. "Meet the speaker (2019): Tony Berry". *British Tourism & Travel Show 2025*. Available online at: <<https://www.tourism-show.co.uk/blog/qas/meet-the-speaker-tony-berry/>> [Accessed 2 June 2024].

<sup>46</sup> Berry, T., 2020. *National Trust: Towards a 10-Year Vision for Places & Experiences*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a3e3bb411b976850808785/t/6515626035b94f1fe996da72/1695900260653/A+10-yr+vision+for+Places+and+Experiences+%28v2.1%29.pdf>> [Accessed 14 October 2024]. p.15.



The report proposed a differentiation of country houses into different categories (see Figure 12): “Treasure houses”, preserved as “centres of excellence”; “Attractions”, helping “the local economy”; “Classics”, providing “a more engaging and active re-invention of the country house visit”; “Showcases”, “run as exhibition and event venues”, with a particular emphasis on “contemporary art, Craft and festivals”; “Museums”, “connecting people with stories and programmes that celebrate and explore their key themes”; “High quality public realm”, to be a “community resource”; and “Commercial operations”, “where the potential for broad public benefit is limited”.<sup>47</sup> There is no information on the Trust website about the decision to classify certain properties as Treasure Houses; nor is there a list of the 28 designated Treasure Houses. However, in the expansive National Trust website there have been allusions to “Treasure Houses” as a formalised concept within the organisation: a now-deleted fleeting statement that “Nostell is one of the National Trust’s ‘Treasure Houses’”,<sup>48</sup> a sentence on the Scotney Castle webpage stating that “Whilst not a “treasure house”, Scotney’s collection is eclectic and vast and is still being catalogued”,<sup>49</sup> and one reference each – both since deleted – to both The Wyne and Petworth as a “Treasure House” with proper-noun capitals.<sup>50</sup>

47 Ibid.

48 National Trust. *Volunteering opportunities at Nostell*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/yorkshire/nostell/volunteering-at-nostell>> [Accessed 3 October 2023].

49 National Trust, 2023. *Visiting Scotney for the first time?* 6 February. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/kent/scotney-castle/visiting-scotney-castle-for-the-first-time>> [Accessed 5 June 2024].

50 National Trust. *The Wyne*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/hampshire/the-wyne>> [Accessed 3 October 2023]; National Trust. *Petworth*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/sussex/petworth>> [Accessed 3 October 2023].

The fact that some of the major ideas in the report have since been enacted indicates that the report is not as insignificant as the Trust management insisted. For example, the 10-Year Vision includes the following:

*“The big shift we need to make is away from an asset-led approach (our primary role is to preserve and present the English Country House as a distinctive part of our national heritage) to an audience-led approach (we care for places that are rich in beauty, history and cultural value: our role is to make these attributes valuable and useful for as many people as possible). That means we have to move away from the assumption that all houses are presented as ‘country house former homes’. We’ll still have some of these, but they’ll be very clearly signalled as ‘traditional’ experiences for specific audiences.”<sup>51</sup>*

This statement is significant for two reasons: first, because it predicts that only a minority of country houses in the Trust’s care will be kept as “‘traditional’ experiences”, and that this will become an unusual approach within the Trust; and second, because it rejects the notion that the Trust’s core responsibility is heritage preservation and suggests that instead it is to provide its audiences with novel experiences, which signals an erosion of purpose and duty and a drift towards “Disneyfication”. Both these predictions appear to have come true, as the case of Clanton shows.

Further evidence that the Trust has indeed been pursuing an approach similar to that outlined in the mansion report is provided by the “Reset” documents, which are not publicly available but which art historian Dr Bendor Grosvenor has written about, having viewed them:

*They [the Reset documents] go alongside the redundancy notices outlining a new staffing structure. Most of these were dated late July, or early to mid-August, just two months after the Vision document was written. The strategy outlined in the Reset documents closely follows that in the Vision document. It is a significant centralising of management and control across the Trust (which may account [for] why I have been unable to find any cases of redundancy at ‘Grade 2’ director level or above).*

*[...]*

*The word ‘differentiation’ features heavily in the Trust’s new Reset documents. In fact, it underpins the Trust’s new country house strategy. ‘Differentiation is something we’ve talked about doing in the Trust for many years’, begins the Reset Differentiation document, written by the Trust’s Director of Culture and Engagement. (Although despite differentiation being so important, it is not something the Trust was keen to discuss, either internally or externally, for it concludes; ‘We’re not publishing the data or numbers for individual properties; as well as some of it not being information we’d want to make public, it’s not practical or desirable for us to run a consultation on that level of detail’.)*

*The Trust’s new differentiation plan follows the broad categories set out in the Vision document. For the biggest houses, the Treasure Houses, the Trust has said opening arrangements will remain broadly as they are now; open for most of the year, with self-guided tours. However, even here, I*

<sup>51</sup> Berry, T., 2020. *National Trust: Towards a 10-Year Vision for Places & Experiences*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a3e3bb411b976850808785/t/6515626035b94f1fe996da72/1695900260653/A+10-yr+vision+for+Places+and+Experiences+%28v2.1%29.pdf>> [Accessed 14 October 2024], p.15.

*have seen documents relating to individual Treasure Houses which make it clear that opening times will be reduced, with shorter opening hours each day, and fewer rooms open for visitors.*

*In the next house category levels, such as 'Classics', the Trust says it is 'committed to 363 [days of the year] opening at all places'. But here again this commitment only extends to 'car parking and access to countryside or parkland'. Opening of the house itself 'may vary'. For all smaller houses - which the documents say 'are currently making an operating loss' - entry will be through guided tours only, which must be pre-booked. Guided tours save the Trust money, because fewer staff and volunteers are needed through the house. Some of these houses will only be open 'for just a handful of days/weekends a year', according to the House Opening Reset document. For many houses, the 'house offer [will be] reduced to three or four main spaces used to present highlights of the collection'. A new post, Curator of Re-Purposing Historic Houses, will help find new uses for those rooms and properties that are deemed suitable for other uses.<sup>52</sup>*

The closure, partial or full, of properties, has been a major cause of concern among members of the Trust, and arguably goes against its statutory mission to be "for the nation".<sup>53</sup> The properties and their collections are not meant to be hidden away from the public.

On 17 August 2020 the Historic Libraries Forum published a statement expressing concern about the National Trust's proposed "sweeping redundancies in its teams of specialist and lead curators across all regions" and the resulting "loss of the majority of its National Specialists (for furniture, pictures and sculpture, decorative arts, textiles, and photography)".<sup>54</sup> It criticised the National Trust's "general move away from specialist knowledge, focussing instead on providing a dynamic visitor experience, one which – surely – must be underpinned by the knowledge and interpretation provided by specialists", and pointed out that the Trust must recognise "that expert knowledge has to be central to its work, and that no single curator – however experienced – can have expert levels of knowledge about art history, furniture, textiles and books alike. Without staff who have the necessary expertise to interpret and care for the Trust's diverse collections, it puts itself in the position of seeming to care little for its own cultural legacy."<sup>55</sup>

In the end, the number of employees the Trust made redundant in 2020/2021 was 1,700, significantly higher than the initial predictions of 1,200.<sup>56</sup>

52 Grosvenor, B., 2020. "Inside the National Trust's Beeching Plan". *Art History News*, 24 August. Available online at: <[https://www.arthistorynews.com/articles/5685\\_Inside\\_the\\_National\\_Trusts\\_Beeching\\_Plan](https://www.arthistorynews.com/articles/5685_Inside_the_National_Trusts_Beeching_Plan)> [Accessed on 4 August 2024].

53 There are good reasons not to keep historic houses open to the public all year, chiefly to prevent the inevitable wear and tear that arises from incessant daily use. Annual short-term closure of the houses enables deep cleaning as well as any necessary maintenance works to be undertaken in good time, in turn leading to the properties having a longer lifespan. However, the key point is that any decision-making relating to the closure of heritage sites should always prioritise concerns about conservation rather than about profit or loss.

54 Historic Libraries Forum, 2020. *Historic Libraries Forum statement on proposed redundancies at the National Trust*. 17 August. Available online at: <<https://historiclibrariesforum.com/2020/08/>> [Accessed on 7 May 2024].

55 *Ibid.*

As Dr Grosvenor explained in an article for *The Art Newspaper* from August 2020, "the 'reset' documents provoke despair at the way the trust is treating its staff on a purely human level. In the midst of the pandemic, at a time of frightening uncertainty for many, the trust has arbitrarily 'closed' hundreds of posts. Those affected must then compete with each other for a smaller number of jobs. It is needlessly heartless. The trust is officially 'consulting' on the job cuts, but since (in the curation & experience department at least) only one proposed new structure has been offered for discussion, it's a consultation in the same way dictators have elections. And of course, there are no reductions planned in the number of senior executive posts in the curation and experience department. The generals behind the lines will be safe in their chateaux."

56 Hargrave, R., 2023. "National Trust boss reveals pain of making 1,700 redundant". *Third Sector*, 27 January. Available online at: <<https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/national-trust-boss-reveals-pain-making-1700-redundant/management/article/1811452>> [Accessed 5 August 2024].



That there is at present a dearth of specialists in the Trust as compared to pre-Covid levels is clear from the signs of poor custodianship at some properties. Just one worrying example of how the National Trust has not been taking adequate care of its properties is its use of cement mortar to repoint lime mortar, as can be seen at Trust site Killerton in Exeter, Devon (see Figure 13). The use of cement mortar is completely inappropriate in such cases as, unlike lime mortar, it does not allow moisture to escape, thereby damaging the building. Moreover, given that the cement mortar does not bond well to its lime base, it tends to crack away from the original mortar. One would not expect the National Trust, a charity dedicated to conservation, to be making such elementary mistakes.

**Figure 13:** Photographs showing the use of cement mortar to repoint lime mortar at Killerton.



## ii. Neglect of gardens, land and estates

In recent years, the National Trust has been pursuing a “re-wilding” policy across much of the land in its care. It has claimed that this is part of its strategy to combat climate change and biodiversity loss, but this approach in many cases runs against its duty to preserve the gardens, parkland and farmland as left to the nation by former owners.

One of the many examples of physical decline is the way in which the Trust’s management has rewilded the gardens of Sissinghurst Castle, a 16th-century estate in Kent, in contrast to the original design and vision of its creators, Vita Sackville-West and Sir Harold Nicolson. The Trust has adopted a “gardening with nature” philosophy which involves a general reduction of intervention, even when this would be necessary: for instance, the Trust allowed the garden to “go brown” during the 2023 summer through a lack of watering.<sup>57</sup> Sissinghurst’s Head Gardener, Troy Scott Smith, said that “It’s incredible to think that at such a significant garden like Sissinghurst, we are making these interventions. And it’s tough, because the garden, by not watering, went brown this year. It was heartbreaking in parts”.<sup>58</sup> Here, the Trust has betrayed the legacy and

<sup>57</sup> Mahon, S., 2023. Troy Scott Smith on not watering at Sissinghurst: ‘It’s incredible that we are making these interventions’. *Gardens Illustrated*, 18 April. Available online at: <<https://www.gardensillustrated.com/news/troy-scott-smith-watering-sissinghurst>> [Accessed 2 May 2024].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

wishes of Sackville-West and Nicolson, who were renowned for their meticulous and creative gardening, and who intended their gardens to be a showcase of beauty, variety, order and colour.

The managed decline of gardens is something that was promoted in the mansion report, too:

*We'll be much bolder in our approach to garden design – with the confidence to extend tradition to the 21st Century to meet new visitor expectations. Where appropriate, this will mean developing a new, more relaxed, garden 'aesthetic' free from existing styles and expectations - so some gardens will become more playful in themselves, rather than relying on generic add-on play areas for children and families.<sup>59</sup>*

Another example of rewilding that has provoked controversy is the garden of Oxburgh House, a 15th-century moated manor house in Norfolk, which the Trust converted during the Covid-19 pandemic from a Victorian "parterre" garden with a geometric and colourful layout into a wild, overgrown one. The Trust decided to let the beds and borders of the garden, which had previously been planted with annuals and perennials in intricate patterns and hues, go wild. The Trust's approach – which has endured long after the end of lockdown – has led to the loss of a distinctive and attractive feature of the house against the wishes of those who bequeathed it to the nation: the Bedingfeld family, who had lovingly tended to the garden they had created until they donated it and the house to the Trust in 1952.

In relation to its estates and lands, too, the Trust has decided to take a "hands-off" approach whereby it increasingly manages the woodlands, meadows and heaths with minimal intervention, letting nature take its course and allowing trees, shrubs and grasses to grow and die naturally, without pruning, thinning or mowing. In doing so, it has in some cases neglected its responsibility to maintain the historic significance and recreational value of the countryside and estates in its care.

An archetypal example of estate neglect is the Sherborne Park Estate in Gloucestershire, which was bequeathed to the Trust in 1982 on the death of the Rt Hon. Charles Dutton, 7<sup>th</sup> Lord Sherborne. In 2022, the Trust began an initially secretive programme called "Big Nature, Big Access"<sup>60</sup> in which "climate-friendly solutions will inform every decision".<sup>61</sup> As part of this project – which in fact appears largely to be an attempt to legitimise a hands-off approach which predates the scheme's establishment – the Trust has allowed the ornamental lakes, formerly the centrepiece of the estate, to silt up, and Sherborne Brook to clog up with dead branches and vegetation rather than flowing freely as it used to; the ingenious system of sluices dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries has been abandoned. Figure 14 provides a direct comparison of the brook in 2009 and 2024, with photographs taken from similar vantage points. The neglect that has taken place in

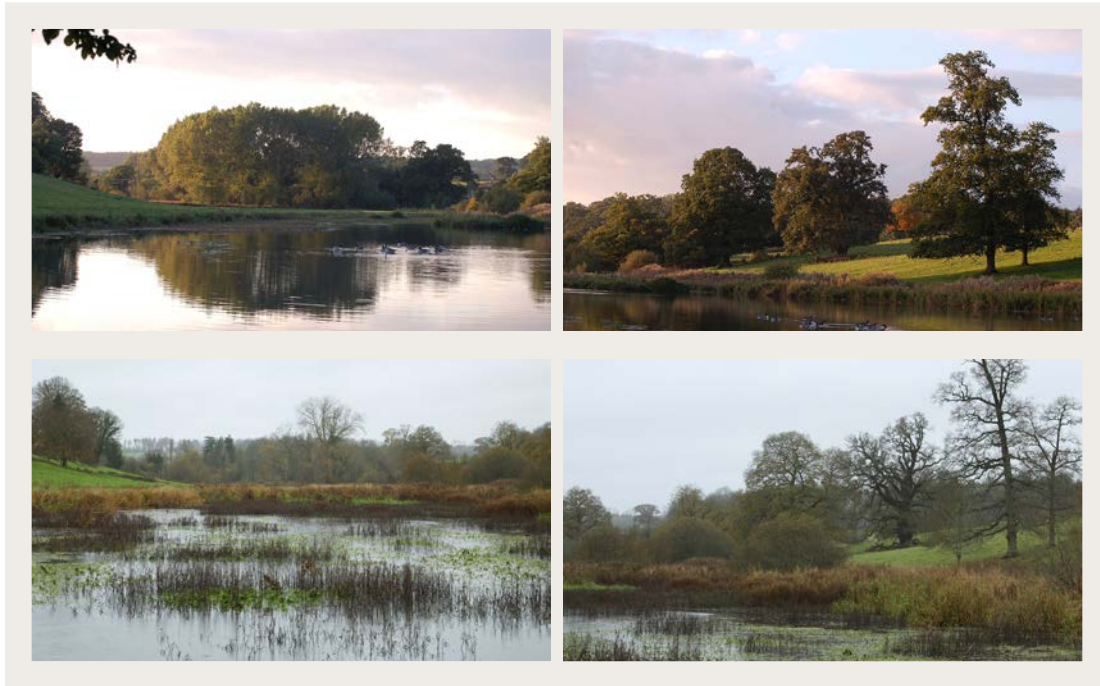
59 Berry, T., 2020. *National Trust: Towards a 10-Year Vision for Places & Experiences*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a3e3bb411b976850808785/t/6515626035b94f1fe996da72/1695900260653/A+10-yr+vision+for+Places+and+Experiences+%28v2.1%29.pdf>> [Accessed 14 October 2024], p.14.

60 The prospectus was created without consultation of locals and then provided to the Cotswold District Council for incorporation into the Master Plan for the area, without any transparency about the fact that there had been no community involvement. The scheme has now been re-named "Big Nature, Better Access" after locals pointed out that "Big Access" arguably undermines sustainable conservation.

61 National Trust. *Sherborne Big Nature Big Access: Concept Paper to be shared with CDC (Cotswold District Council)*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/media/gqfnsbnh/sherborne-large-lowland-estate-cdc-concept-paper.pdf>> [Accessed 14 November 2024].

recent years by National Trust management is immediately noticeable, as it is also from the image of the now-dilapidated Boathouse in Figure 15.

**Figure 14:** Photographs of Sherborne Brook in 2009 (top) compared to November 2024 (bottom) from similar vantage points.



**Figure 15:** The Boathouse at Sherborne, formerly and now.



Though there used to be three working farms on the estate, now only half of the land on one such farm is arable. The Trust has allowed the farm buildings to become dilapidated, with several on the brink of irreparable damage (see Figure 16). Grade II-listed Sheafhouse, for instance, has a significant badger infestation which is undermining the building's foundations. The management has also let the tenanted cottages fall into disrepair, resulting in tenant families living in poor conditions, with damp and mould being common problems; vacated houses are left empty by the Trust, with around ten of the eighty such houses on the estate currently unoccupied despite the housing demand. All this goes against the wishes of Lord Sherborne as set out in his will, which stated that "This gift of residue I make with the intention of attempting to safe-guard the



continuity of the Sherborne Estate which has over the years been fostered by my family". The evidence, showing consistent under-investment, points to a lack of interest on the part of the Trust's management in carrying out these wishes.

**Figure 16:** Dilapidated farm buildings on the Sherborne Park Estate.



Similarly, a farmer in mid-Devon has complained that in the year following the ending of his tenancy the Trust neglected the farm he formerly worked, allowing it to become overgrown with "thistle, dock and bramble" and making it unrecognisable (see Figure 17).<sup>62</sup> The farmer added that:

*"The way they have conducted themselves in destroying our farm since we left less than a year ago is unbelievable. They have managed to alienate all the residents and just about all the village with their arrogant disregard for neighbours and let redundant farm buildings for alternative uses without obtaining planning permission. They have created leases with tenants and forced them to sign for*

<sup>62</sup> Farming Forum, 2022. *National Trust farms*. [chat forum] Available online at: <<https://thefarmingforum.co.uk/index.php?threads/national-trust-farms.350187>> [Accessed 11 November 2024], p.9.

*at least three years. Planning has now been withdrawn by them as there were so many objections so I don't quite know where that leaves them or the tenants legally. Meantime the land remains abandoned and none of the pasture has been grazed since we moved out. The farmhouse and cottage both remain empty in a time when there is a chronic housing shortage.”<sup>63</sup>*

With many such cases, there is a running theme of the Trust's management allowing physical decline to take place over the course of many months and sometimes years in order to justify a wholesale change in how a site is run, whether that is by rewilding, selling off land or converting former farmhouses and barns to lucrative holiday lets; the ultimate goal tends to be the pursuit of activities that go against the Trust's charitable and statutory purposes and ethos.

**Figure 17:** Farm neglected by the National Trust management following the end of a tenancy.<sup>64</sup>



Arable farmland across the country has also been re-appropriated from tenant farmers for rewilding purposes, with the results often not matching up with the Trust's rhetoric when the schemes are first announced. In many cases, much-publicised visions of wildflower meadows and new forests are belied by the subsequent reality of untended fields with an overgrowth of thistles, brambles, ragwort, docks, gorse and bracken. Yet, for reasons explored in chapter two of this report, the National Trust's management sustains its rhetoric and actions without consideration either for its responsibilities or for the likely downsides of its activities. At Killerton in Devon, the tenant farmer was given a cash incentive to leave so that the Trust could pursue a rewilding scheme.<sup>65</sup> However, a local livestock farmer has described "huge piles of mature trees they have felled to rewild Killerton, from the native woodlands, several hundred metres long by 6m high" which they replaced with "1 year-old saplings".<sup>66</sup> This would suggest that the land is not being looked after responsibly, not only from a farming but also from a purely environmental

| 63 *Ibid.*, p.13.

| 64 *Ibid.*, p.9.

| 65 Curtis, M., 2022. "National Trust rewilding projects leaves tenants feeling pushed out". *Farmers Weekly*. 27 July. Available online at: <<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/business-management/tenancies-rents/national-trust-rewilding-projects-leaves-tenants-feel-pushed-out>> [Accessed 3 July 2024].

| 66 Farming Forum, 2022. *National Trust farms*. [chat forum] Available online at: <<https://thefarmingforum.co.uk/index.php?threads/national-trust-farms.350187>> [Accessed 11 November 2024], p.14.

perspective.

Again, the new approach being taken towards farmland often directly contradicts the conditions on which the land was left to the Trust in the first place. For example, the Trust retired a tenant farmer couple, Andrew and Kate Lamont, from farming Lower Halsdon farm in Exmouth in order to reclaim it for “diverse purposes”. Such actions run counter to the stipulation of the farmer, Stanley Long, who left the land to the Trust in 1991, that “it would be used as agricultural land in perpetuity”.<sup>67</sup> The Trust’s management claims on its website that “Our plans when the tenancy does come to an end in 2026 to improve the land for nature and people are in accordance with the wishes of the donor and include conservation grazing, some limited arable cropping to support farmland birds, tree and orchard planting”.<sup>68</sup> However, this message is seemingly contradicted in a letter sent by the Trust’s director of land and estates, Giles Hunt, to the Farmers Association, in which he “explains that the restricted covenants – which stated that the farm should not be used for any other purpose, other than an agricultural or horticultural holding – ‘are no longer enforceable.’”<sup>69</sup>

**Figure 18:** Damage to the heather at Long Mynd caused by the National Trust.<sup>70</sup>



In 2024, the National Trust was reprimanded by Natural England for having “conducted heather seed harvesting without the correct SSSI [Site of Special Scientific Interest] consent in place” at the Long Mynd in the Shropshire Hills.<sup>71</sup> This seed brush harvesting, undertaken using heavy machinery in wet conditions, had caused significant and not easily reversible damage to the heather (see Figure 18), now requiring an extended recovery period.<sup>72</sup> The irony is that the Trust was harvesting the heather to transfer to and to help rewild 240 acres of arable land at Mose

67 Case, P., 2024. “National Trust to reclaim farm from tenant farmers”. *Farmers Weekly*, 18 September. Available online at: <<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/business-management/tenancies-rents/national-trust-to-reclaim-farm-from-tenant-farmers#:~:text=Andrew%20and%20Kate%20Lamont%2C%20who,as%20agricultural%20land%20in%20perpetuity.>> [Accessed 20 September 2024].

68 National Trust, 2024. *Lower Halsdon Farm update*. 25 September. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/devon/a-la-ronde/lower-halsdon-farm>> [Accessed 25 September 2024].

69 Case, P., 2024. “National Trust to reclaim farm from tenant farmers”. *Farmers Weekly*, 18 September. Available online at: <<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/business-management/tenancies-rents/national-trust-to-reclaim-farm-from-tenant-farmers#:~:text=Andrew%20and%20Kate%20Lamont%2C%20who,as%20agricultural%20land%20in%20perpetuity.>> [Accessed 20 September 2024].

70 Long Mynd Commoners, 2024. [Facebook post] 29 October. Available online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/LongmyndCommoners/posts/we-would-like-to-make-it-clear-that-the-longmynd-commoners-have-no-connection-to/1123625642543723/>> [Accessed 10 December 2024].

71 Godfrey, B., 2024. “Heather harvesting carried out without consent”. *BBC*, 12 November. Available online at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clj24j4yxwo>> [Accessed 11 December 2024].

72 *Ibid.*



Farm on the Dudsmaston Estate in Shropshire.<sup>73</sup> Tom Lloyd, the Secretary of the Long Mynd Commoners' Society and a fourth-generation hill farmer, expressed disappointment that the "National Trust - Europe's largest conservation body - has felt able to severely damage one area in pursuit of regeneration of another".<sup>74</sup>

The Trust's management has also failed to uphold its original ethos by reneging on its responsibilities to maintain Sudbury sports field in front of Sudbury Hall in Derbyshire as a recreational site for locals; Lord Vernon's Memorandum of Wishes when he agreed the transfer of the estate to the National Trust in the 1960s had included a wish that "the inhabitants of the Parish of Sudbury and their guests have use of the cricket field for recreational purposes". The Trust's decision to take the field back at the end of the lease with the Sudbury Parish Council in order to meet "biodiversity, conservation and eco targets"<sup>75</sup> through rewilding was strongly contested by locals: a petition started in January 2024 to save the sports field amassed over 47,000 signatures.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the Trust took back the land in June 2024, not only ending over a century of sport within the village on what was, once one of the most picturesque village greens in the country (see Figure 19).

**Figure 19:** *The now-neglected grassy area in front of Sudbury Hall.*



For all its apparent reverence for green spaces and commitment to an ecological agenda, the Trust's management has betrayed its founding memorandum of association by trying to sell off some of its treasured "green spaces"<sup>77</sup> to private developers. In 2021, the Trust announced that

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Bates, I., 2024. "National Trust sparks anger amid plans to 'turn football pitch into biodiversity zone to meet eco targets'". *Birmingham Live*, 16 April. Available online at: <<https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/national-trust-sparks-anger-amid-29004808>> [Accessed 7 August 2024].

<sup>76</sup> Mellor, J., 2024. *Preserve Sudbury Sportsfield for Current and Future Generations*. [Petition] Available online at: <<https://www.change.org/p/preserve-sudbury-sportsfield-for-current-and-future-generations>> [Accessed 30 October 2024].

<sup>77</sup> National Trust, 2024. *Children's Urgent Call: More Time in Nature Essential Shows New Survey by National Trust and First News*. [press release] 1 April. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/childrens-urgent-call-more-time-in-nature-essential>> [Accessed 5 December 2024].

it would be selling two pieces of Trust-owned land: Bonds Meadow in Bovey Tracey, Devon; and Clayton Meadow in Studland, Dorset. Only thanks to relentless campaigning by organised groups of local activists – the Save Bonds Meadow campaign group and the Save Clayton Meadow petition, respectively – were these plans halted, and after two years both schemes were eventually abandoned by the Trust. Nevertheless, the fact that the Trust's management had had no qualms about selling off land "in a manner inconsistent with the objects of the Trust" is another signal of decline and the plans to sell could easily be revived.

## b) Indulging whims: vanity projects

In recent years, even as the National Trust has been failing to fulfil its core purposes to a high standard, its management has been spending time, energy and resources on activities that have no relevance, or only tangential relevance, to the duties of the Trust. One such project is "**Blossom Watch**", a National Trust campaign started in March 2020 and described as "a celebration of nature inspired by the beauty of blossom and the message of hope and renewal it brings".<sup>78</sup> Initially an online-only campaign, encouraging people to share images of blossom during lockdown, over time it has turned into a more tangible project, with "the planting of the first of many blossom circles in UK cities [...] unveiled at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London in May 2021 by the Mayor of London".<sup>79</sup>

A "ring of blossom" was similarly created in Birmingham, with over 500 blossom trees planted by the Trust on the "iconic Number 11 circular bus route" in Birmingham, on land not owned by the charity.<sup>80</sup> The programme has also involved the poet laureate Simon Armitage, who was commissioned by the Trust to undertake a tour of the country, with his band LYR, to "find out what blossom means to different people" and to result in poetry and music related to blossom.<sup>81</sup> It is unclear how this is related to the Trust's core remit of conserving the historic places and natural spaces which have been bequeathed to it.

The **Castlefield Viaduct** project, which entailed turning a derelict bridge in Manchester into a garden, is another example of a labour- and resource-intensive scheme that does not appear to fall within the Trust's remit, principally because the bridge is not Trust-owned. In 2021 the Trust received "temporary planning approval [...] to open Castlefield viaduct to the public".<sup>82</sup>

Even setting aside the central criticism that the Trust should not be undertaking projects on non-Trust land, it is not clear how this project is helping to fulfil its founders' broader societal vision. The claim of "Bringing nature and beauty to the centre of urban areas"<sup>83</sup> – itself doubtful given the harsh, angular and modernist design featuring more rusted metal and gravel pathway than

| 78 *National Trust Annual Report 2021–2022*, p.21.

| 79 *Ibid.*

| 80 National Trust, 2024. *Helping communities blossom*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/helping-communities-blossom>> [Accessed 25 September 2024].

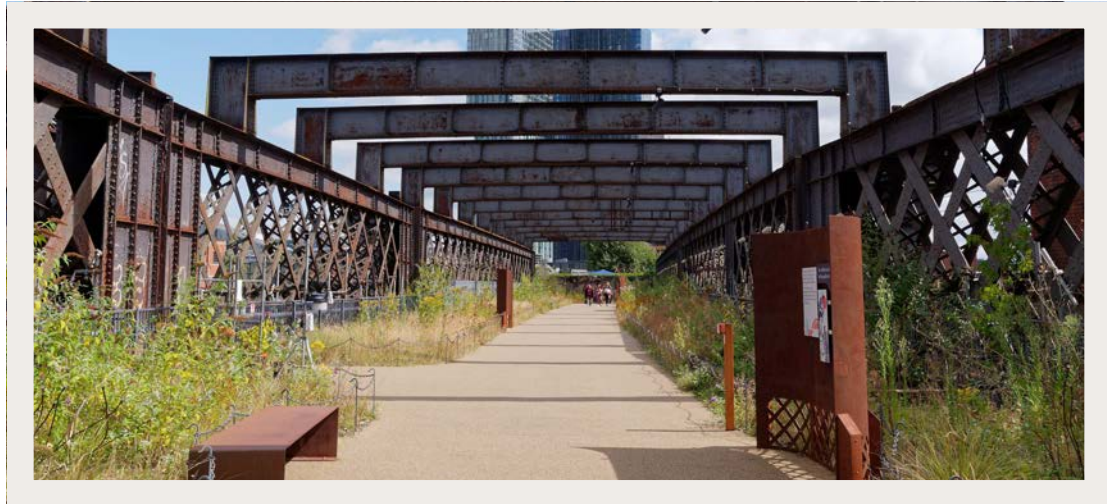
| 81 National Trust, 2023. *National Trust invites public to celebrate fleeting beauty of spring in Blossom Week extravaganza*. 24 April. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/national-trust-invites-public-to-celebrate-fleeting-beauty-of-spring-in-blossom-week-extravaganza>> [Accessed 24 July 2024].

| 82 Laird, D., 2021. "National Trust receives temporary planning approval for urban park scheme". *LinkedIn*. 23 November. Available online at: <[https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/national-trust-receives-temporary-planning-approval-urban-laird?trk=public\\_post](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/national-trust-receives-temporary-planning-approval-urban-laird?trk=public_post)> [Accessed on 21 September 2024].

| 83 *Ibid.*

greenery (see Figure 20) – on which the Trust management's case for the viaduct centres may rhetorically evoke Octavia Hill's words and sentiments about the importance of green spaces for city dwellers.

**Figure 20:** *Castlefield Viaduct.*



However, in practice it would be disingenuous to present the Castlefield Viaduct as something which would embody her vision, of improving the lives of the most poverty-stricken in society. This is because, as Professor Ian Mell of the University of Manchester's Environmental & Landscape Planning department has observed, the target audience of the viaduct is quite different:

*The redevelopment of the Castlefield Viaduct presents an interesting conundrum for Manchester and other UK cities. High-quality and potentially exclusive locations that are inaccessible can nonetheless act as a catalyst for green-space investment linked to regeneration programmes like Grosvenor's Living Cities. This strategy provides increased certainty for investors but primarily serves specific communities, that is, those who can afford market-rate apartments.<sup>84</sup>*

The National Trust was not established to gentrify cities and serve the interests of investors: that is simply not its job.

Both the "Blossom Watch" and Castlefield Viaduct initiatives have been justified using a very liberal interpretation of the Trust's charitable mission, which in this context the Trust claims is "to bring nature to everyone".<sup>85</sup> Yet this vision appears to be based more on the Director-General's personal passions than upon the actual governing object of the Trust, which refers to the Trust's duties as covering only the land and tenements which it owns itself (see inside of front cover). Upon taking up her new role as Director-General in 2018, Hilary McGrady announced a new emphasis on targeting city dwellers, saying that "We have had a lot of success in bringing a lot of people out to our properties but I think the reality is that I want to go to where they are. I think

<sup>84</sup> Mell, I., 2022. Castlefield Viaduct: Manchester's new park in the sky could transform the city – but who will benefit? *The Conversation*. Available online at: <<https://theconversation.com/castlefield-viaduct-manchesters-new-park-in-the-sky-could-transform-the-city-but-who-will-benefit-188169>> [Accessed 22 July 2024].

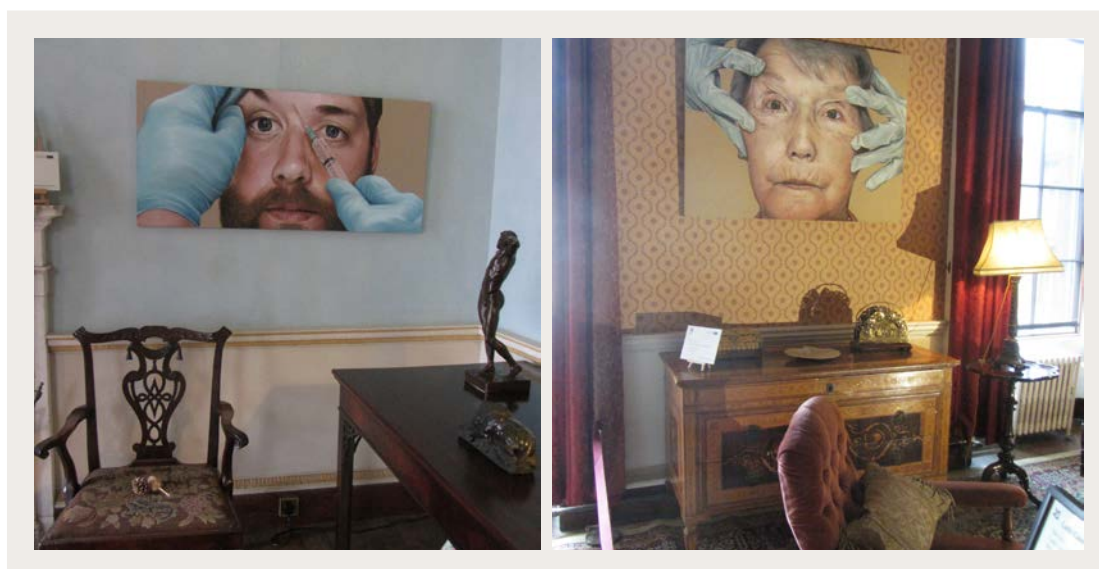
<sup>85</sup> National Trust. *Addressing unequal access to nature, beauty and history in urban places*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/nature-climate/how-the-national-trust-is-supporting-urban-heritage-and-parks>> [Accessed 21 July 2024].



the idea of everybody having to come to us on our terms [...] those days are probably gone. I am really interested in going to where people are.”<sup>86</sup> The Trust management's lack of clarity about the charity's remit, or its willingness to test the boundaries, does not inspire confidence and trust. While seemingly innocuous, such endeavours as Blossom Watch and the Castlefield Viaduct redirect precious time and energy away from addressing the many failings at actual Trust sites.

Moreover, both projects are symptoms of a general trend within the National Trust to shift attention away from the historic buildings in its care and to prioritise nature, even when the nature in question is not strictly within the Trust's remit.<sup>87</sup> While open spaces – when they belong to the Trust – are an important part of the charity's remit, the deliberate demotion of built heritage to second place is itself another sign of decline. Truly committed heritage conservators would see that natural and built heritage should, at a minimum, be given equal attention, and indeed that buildings typically require more attention and tending to, given that – by virtue of being non-regenerative – they are at greater risk of irreversible decay and neglect. It is irresponsible for the National Trust's management to switch conservation priorities.<sup>88</sup>

**Figure 21:** Drawings on display at Berrington Hall as part of the “Skin Deep” exhibition.



The National Trust has also been indulging the whims of its curators by allowing irrelevant and intrusive contemporary art installations at its historic properties. One particularly inappropriate such installation was the 2020 “Skin Deep” exhibition by Oliver Jones, showcased at Berrington Hall in Leominster, Herefordshire. Figure 21 shows how the drawings on display were out of place

<sup>86</sup> Quinn, B., 2018. “National Trust to target city dwellers in ‘radical’ change of approach”. *The Guardian*, 20 April. Available online at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/20/national-trust-target-city-dwellers-radical-change-approach>> [Accessed 2 July 2024].

<sup>87</sup> The National Trust's “Response to the People's Plan for Nature [2023]” posits that the UK “should be making sure that nature is at the heart of decision making at every level” (p.5) and that “we need nature to have a voice at the centre of decision-making” (p.12), with the document outlining how the Trust would support the attainment of this goal. An attempt to justify such action appears to be made on p.273 of the same document with the statement that “Our Founder, Octavia Hill [sic] was a passionate supporter of the need for everyone to have access to nature”. Not only was Hill one of three founders rather than the sole founder of the organisation, but her aim in relation to the National Trust was to acquire green spaces in order to preserve them for the nation for prosperity. The Trust's nature manifesto appears to overstep these original aims and its mandate.

<sup>88</sup> The purpose of pointing out this trend is not to minimise the importance of nature, the conservation of which – as long as it is on land in the charity's care – is a key part of the Trust's duty. Indeed, any attempt to separate the two central aspects of the Trust's work – the conservation of built heritage and of natural heritage – is dangerous because it could lead to the artificial division of estates, which would be damaging and against the wishes of the previous owners.

with the traditional aesthetics of the house's interior. The curators made no attempt to link the subject matter of the exhibition to the house, describing it as “touching on issues of self-obsession and self-esteem” to illustrate “a contemporary quest for beauty and perfection that takes in plastic surgery and body modification”.

Figure 22 showcases a particularly tasteless example from the exhibition, displayed in the Berrington Hall Dining Room, contrasted with a photograph of the room with the customary painting hung in its place. It is clear from comparing the 2020 photo (during the exhibition) and the 2022 photo that the curators not only moved pieces of furniture order to accommodate the oversized drawing, but also removed items from the desk at the end of the room, indicating that the exhibition was prioritised over visitors' access to the collections.

**Figure 22:** Close-up of a picture in the “Skin Deep” exhibition at Berrington Hall, with a comparison beneath of the Dining Room during the exhibition and its usual state.<sup>89</sup>



At some properties, projects of marginal relevance to the Trust's objects have been undertaken, apparently to serve as distractions from its failings elsewhere. At Tyntesfield House, which has exhibited advanced internal physical decay since it was transferred to the ownership of the Trust,

<sup>89</sup> Nanila, 2022. "Berrington Hall, National Trust". *LiveJournal*, 26 February. Available online at: <<https://nanila.livejournal.com/1388871.html>> [Accessed 14 November 2024].

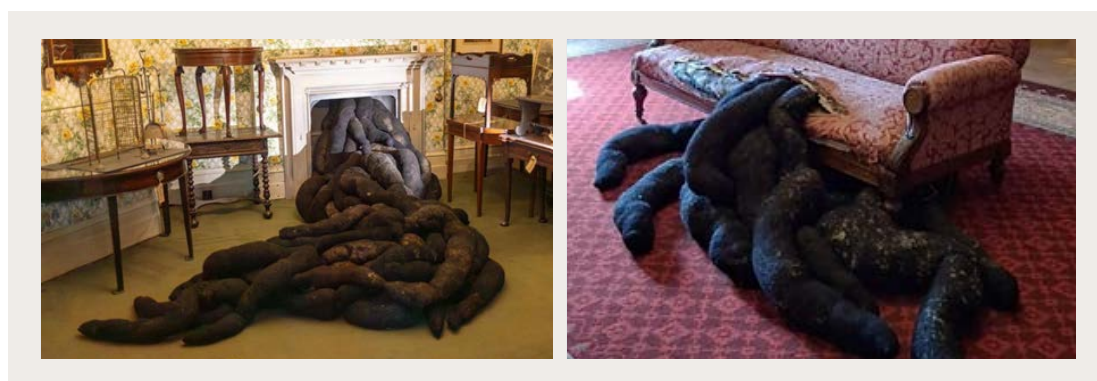
staff appear to have been pre-occupied with the creation of an “audio-visual installation in the aviary at Tyntesfield [...] co-created by artists Oshii and Jono Gilmurray with local young people from Hartcliffe” (see Figure 23). “Echoes from the Aviary” ran from 4<sup>th</sup> May to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2024 and was “supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England”.<sup>90</sup>

**Figure 23:** “Echoes from the Aviary” at Tyntesfield – descriptions and the display itself.



Soon after the end of the Aviary exhibition, another more controversial contemporary art installation – called “The Uninvited Guest from the Unremembered Past”<sup>91</sup> – was unveiled at Tyntesfield.<sup>92</sup> Widely described by visitors as resembling “poo” (see Figure 24), the installation detracted from the Victorian Gothic Revival interior and prevented many from enjoying their visit, contrary to the Trust’s statutory and charitable aims.<sup>93</sup>

**Figure 24:** Photos of the contemporary art installation “The Uninvited Guest from the Unremembered Past” at Tyntesfield.



<sup>90</sup> National Trust. *Trust New Art exhibitions and events*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/whats-on/trust-new-art-exhibitions-and-events>> [3 July 2024].

<sup>91</sup> The exhibition's title references the eponymous 2011 psychoanalytic book by Prophecy Coles, which aims to explore “the Unconscious Transmission of Trauma Across the Generations”. Perhaps the curators’ intention by featuring this exhibition at Tyntesfield was to suggest that the house has hidden trauma and the “dark histories” to which the National Trust constantly refers.

<sup>92</sup> SWNS, 2024. “Art at Tyntesfield National Trust house looks like ‘pile of poo’”. *Somerset County Gazette*, 14 September. Available online at: <<https://www.somersetcountygazette.co.uk/news/24585142.art-tyntesfield-national-trust-house-looks-like-pile-poo/>> [Accessed 10 December 2024].

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



Sudbury Hall is another clear example of ideological decline which would appear to prove that the Trust's management has adopted the experimental approach outlined in the mansion report, rather than a more traditional one. The reinvention of Sudbury Hall as the "Children's Country House at Sudbury" has entailed changes ranging from infantile to actively offensive. Perhaps most offensive is the new captioning in the once magnificent Long Gallery (now transformed into a children's play area, replete with rainbow toys and recently published children's books pushing fashionable ideologies), where instead of conventional art labels describing the various paintings, there are large speech bubbles containing immature invented quotations from the sitters. One speech bubble (see Figure 25), hanging underneath a portrait of Henry Vernon, whose father built Sudbury Hall, reads as follows: "They said this pose would highlight my importance and dignity but do you think I just look like I have indigestion?".

**Figure 25:** One of the portrait captions in the Long Gallery at Sudbury Hall.



Not only is this disrespectful to the descendants of Lord Vernon – including those who bequeathed Sudbury to the nation – but it insults the intelligence of its target audience and can hardly be argued to help children become interested in heritage in any meaningful way. Indeed, perhaps the opposite could be argued: that such engagement encourages children to be dismissive and contemptuous of the past and of historical figures. The Trust's "renovation plan for Sudbury specifically proposed turning the house into a "playground" with "outrageous" presentation", in line with the predictions of the mansion report.<sup>94</sup>

The Trust is betraying its founding, statutory and charitable principles by letting sites in its care deteriorate (as outlined in section a of this chapter) while engaging in such frivolous and irrelevant activities as those described in this sub-section.

### c) From custodians to activists

One of the main strategies employed by the Trust's management to justify and obscure its departure from its core remit has been to present itself as a virtuous and progressive organisation, committed to social justice issues with emphases on decolonisation, environmental sustainability, and diversity and inclusion. By thus adopting a veneer of virtue, the Trust has sought to appeal to new and different audiences – simultaneously alienating much of its longstanding core and loyal membership – while also deflecting criticism from those who might question its performance in other respects.

<sup>94</sup> Po, C., 2024. "The National Trust should act its age". *The Critic*, 12 June 2024. Available online at: <<https://thecritic.co.uk/the-national-trust-should-act-its-age/>> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

## i. The distortion of history

One sign of the Trust's philosophised decline has been its imposition of distorted historical narratives in an attempt to pursue a politically correct and ideologically driven agenda. The Trust appears in recent years to have turned from celebrating the historic properties in its care to ignoring or downplaying their historical and cultural significance, and to promoting a narrow and biased view of the past shaped by the views and trends of today.

One method has been reframing the history of its country houses and collections through the lens of slavery and colonialism. In September 2020, amidst the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the National Trust came under fire again when it published a 115-page "Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery" (hereafter the slavery report). The report – co-edited by three senior Trust curators and by Dr Corinne Fowler, an academic in the English department at the University of Leicester – was not written, led or reviewed by qualified experts on the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the subject on which it so heavily focussed. Nor did it make any attempt to include links to abolitionist history.<sup>95</sup>

Shortly before the report's publication, Dr Tarnya Cooper, the Trust's Curatorial and Collections Director, wrote to donor families to warn them of the forthcoming sully of their ancestors' reputations.<sup>96</sup> One such family were the Tollemaches, and interrogation by a retired history professor and former Trust volunteer, Tony Adler, of the draft entry for Ham House (the Tollemaches' residence) revealed the Trust's central claim that "Sir Lionel [Tollemache] signed a charter granting a British monopoly on transporting slaves from Africa to the Americas" to be factually untrue.<sup>97</sup> Adler said that "My suspicion, on reading this shoddy piece of work, is that most of their source material came from Wikipedia."<sup>98</sup> The subsequently-published interim report contains no mention of the Tollemache family.

The main criticism of the report from members and from the public was not that genuine, direct links to slavery should be hidden – even though the Trust's management have repeatedly used this as a straw man in their defence of the report – but rather that it was relevant to present these only in the context of wider, factual explorations of the history of the Trust's properties, and always in a proportionate and impartial way. It seems particularly unfair for the Trust to have highlighted the most unsavoury (supposed) aspects of the families who had left their houses to the nation, often blowing perceived links to slavery out of proportion, and paying little if any regard to the good deeds of those families. As former Trust Chairman Sir Simon Jenkins wrote:

*"[even] if the Trust was right to look again at its presentation, it was clearly a mistake to subcontract such a sensitive matter to a group of partisan academics talking a private language that was bound to inflame some members' feelings. The rewritings needed stronger oversight. For example, slavery and empire are two quite separate issues. The condemnation of Churchill in his global shrine of*

| 95 Moore, C., 2020. "The National Trust's shameful manifesto". *The Spectator*. 26 September.

| 96 Adams, G., 2020. "National Witch-hunt: Some of Britain's grandest families have bequeathed their homes to the National Trust – now hijacked by the PC mob. Their reward? To be publicly smeared over dubious links to slavery, writes GUY ADAMS". *Daily Mail*, 12 September. Available online at: <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8724183/GUY-ADAMS-National-Trust-launches-national-witch-hunt.html>> [Accessed 4 June 2024].

| 97 *Ibid.*

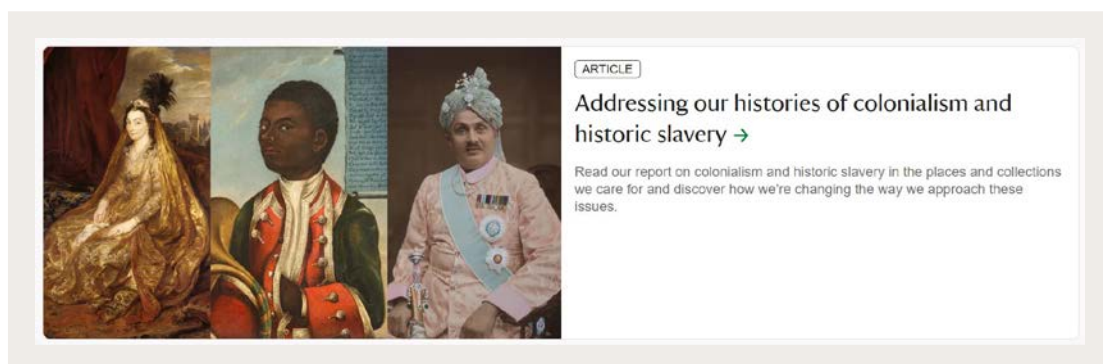
| 98 *Ibid.*



*Chartwell – for his opposition to self-governance in India – was infantile”.*<sup>99</sup>

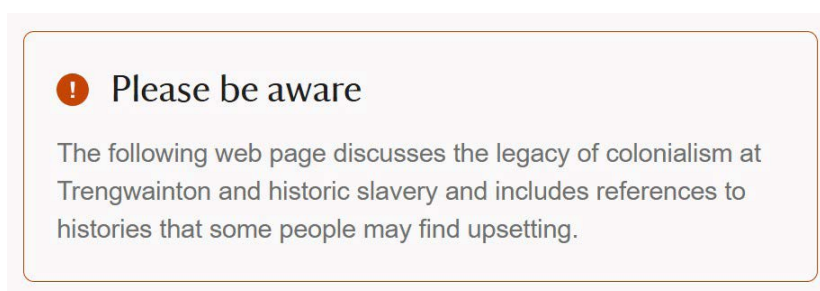
Public pressure and media scrutiny led to the Trust seemingly abandoning the project, and the final report has never been released; as of January 2025, only the interim report is publicly available.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, its legacy lives on; for example, many pages on the Trust website have a pop-up link titled “addressing our histories of colonialism and historic slavery” with the blurb “read our report on colonialism and historic slavery in the places and collections we care for and discover how we’re changing the way we approach these issues” (see Figure 26). What is meant by “colonialism and historic slavery *in the places and collections we care for*”<sup>101</sup> is not clear. Slavery did not take place in National Trust properties; nor, indeed, did colonialism.

**Figure 26:** Pop-up link advertising the interim report on the National Trust’s webpage.



In other places on the website, the decolonisation rhetoric has been taken to extremes. The Trengwainton webpage includes a trigger warning (see Figure 27) telling readers to “Please be aware: The following web page discusses the legacy of colonialism at Trengwainton and historic slavery and includes references to histories that some people may find upsetting.”<sup>102</sup>

**Figure 27:** Trigger warning on National Trust webpage on Trengwainton.<sup>103</sup>



Another example of the Trust’s distortion of history and culture was its “Colonial Countryside” project, “a child-led writing and history project that explored the African, Caribbean and Indian

<sup>99</sup> Jenkins, S., 2021. “The National Trust has needlessly provoked an ‘anti-woke’ campaign”. *The Guardian*, 13 October. Available online at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/13/national-anti-woke-campaign-slavery-churchill-culture-war>> [Accessed 1 October 2024].

<sup>100</sup> It is not clear whether those commissioned to research and write the report were let go or received the full amount of the funding without having finished the job.

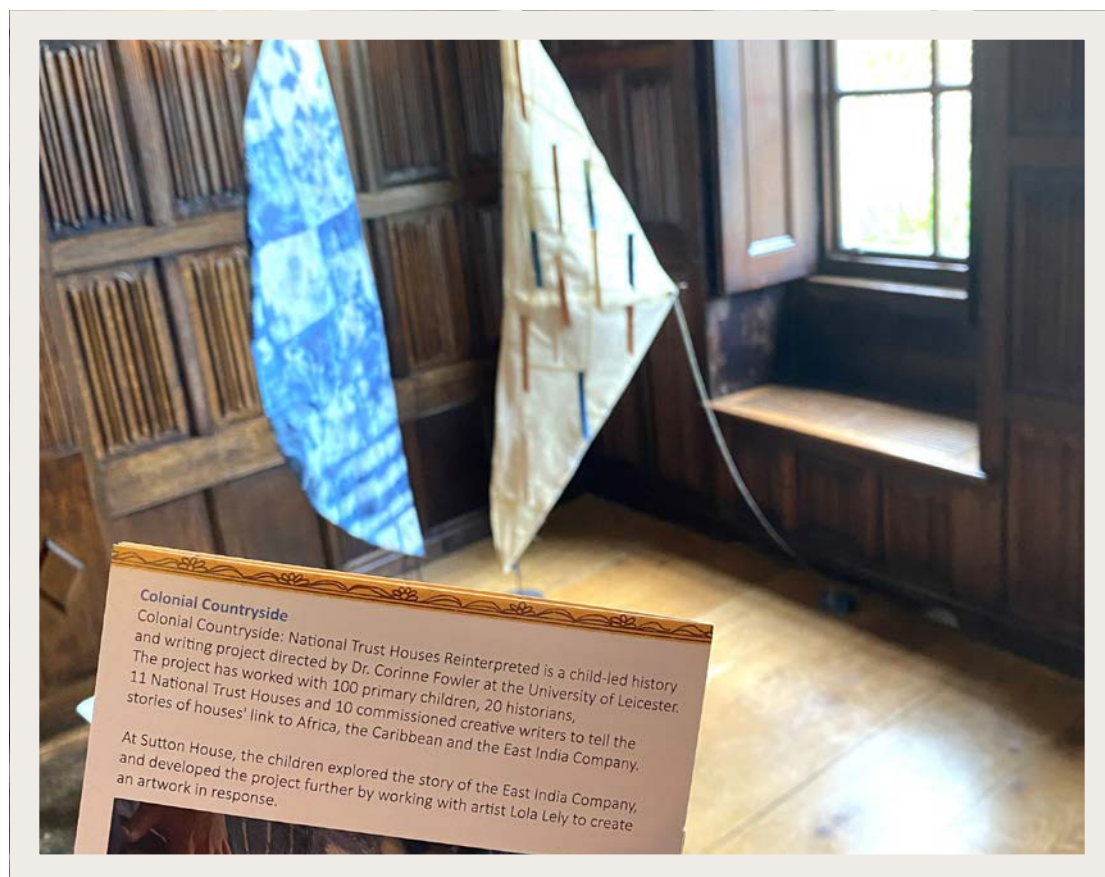
<sup>101</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>102</sup> National Trust. *Sir Rose Price, Trengwainton and Jamaica*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cornwall/trengwainton-garden/trengwaintons-links-with-historic-slavery>> [Accessed 3 June 2024].

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

connections at 11 of the properties we care for. Collaborating with Dr Corinne Fowler at the University of Leicester, the project inspired a new generation of young people to advocate talking about colonial history".<sup>104</sup> Featuring as part of the scheme was a child advisory board, as well as a Children's Conference in Leicester in November 2018.<sup>105</sup> One of the tangible outputs of the initiative was a set of "Colonial Countryside" resources which resulted in curriculum changes across 63 schools to focus more heavily on colonialism and its impacts.<sup>106</sup> These resources were produced by Dan Lyndon-Cohen, who specialises in the integration of identity politics into school history curricula<sup>107</sup> and has spearheaded it both before and during his directorship of the Schools History Project.<sup>108</sup> He did so drawing "very closely" on work by Marian Gwyn (self-described as a "Heritage consultant specialising in colonial history, especially connections between the slave trade and Wales")<sup>109</sup>, who also claimed to "have conducted a considerable amount of work on the Penrhyn estate and advised Dr Fowler's project on this".<sup>110</sup>

**Figure 28:** A "Colonial Countryside" art installation and leaflet at Sutton House.



<sup>104</sup> National Trust. *Colonial Countryside Project*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/colonial-countryside-project>> [Accessed 12 September 2024].

<sup>105</sup> University of Leicester. *Colonial Countryside Project: Activities and events*. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/colonial-countryside/activities-events>> [Accessed 3 September 2024].

<sup>106</sup> Peepal Tree Press. *Corinne Fowler (Ed)*. Available online at: <<https://www.peepaltreepress.com/authors/corinne-fowler-ed>> [Accessed 3 September 2024].

<sup>107</sup> In 2006, Lyndon-Cohen published an article on "Integrating black British history in the National Curriculum", but by 2021 had gone further to call for an approach of "Decolonise, Don't Diversify" in relation to school history curricula.

<sup>108</sup> Lyndon, D., 2021. [X post] 5 May. Available online at: <<https://x.com/danlyndon/status/1390018693883736067>> [Accessed 7 June 2024].

<sup>109</sup> Gwyn, M. [X account] Available online at: <<https://x.com/mariangwyn>> [Accessed 7 June 2024].

<sup>110</sup> Gwyn, M., 2021. [X post] 5 May. Available online at: <<https://x.com/mariangwyn/status/1390014991470714880>> [Accessed 7 June 2024].

Colonial Countryside leaflets were distributed at Trust properties such as Sutton House (see Figure 28). A National Trust-produced book called *Colonial Countryside* was also published in October 2023:

*Colonial Countryside is a book of commissioned poems and short stories produced by ten global majority [meaning “non-white”] writers featuring National Trust houses with significant colonial histories. This includes properties whose owners engaged in the slavery business, in colonial administration or who were involved with the East India Company or British rule in India.*

*Historians have accompanied these pieces with commentaries detailing the evidence upon which each creative commission was based. The book ends with a photo essay by the project’s commissioned photographer, Ingrid Pollard, the Turner Prize shortlisted artist who has pioneered critical interventions into the supposed whiteness of the British countryside.<sup>111</sup>*

Dr Fowler posited that:

*“Only those children [involved in the Colonial Countryside Project], I believe, have the power to reach a whole army of volunteers who are not yet familiar with this history, who would be willing, if they think like grandparents, to relate to the children, to learn in a kind of reverse mentoring relationship, what those colonial connections actually are for each property, because each property tells a different story”.<sup>112</sup>*

No evidence was provided to support the assertion that there is “a whole army of volunteers who are not yet familiar with this history” and it would seem patronising to suggest that primary schoolchildren could teach long-serving Trust volunteers.

It is surprising that Dr Fowler was involved in leading two large-scale projects on similar subjects, because she lacked the qualifications to be undertaking serious historical research. At the time of her appointment as Director of the Colonial Countryside Project, she was a lecturer in the English Literature department at the University of Leicester. She has since become a “Professor of Colonialism and Heritage” in the Museum Studies department at the same university, though this position would appear to have been obtained largely a result of her work with the National Trust rather than because of any genuine qualifications independently obtained. In any case, Dr Fowler is hardly the impartial scholar the National Trust should have hired for a research project, particularly on such a contentious topic, evidenced by her authorship of *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England’s Colonial Connections* (2020), as well as her position as a co-investigator of the Leverhulme Rural Racism Project, led by Professor Neil Chakraborti of the University of Leicester’s Centre for Hate Studies.

The slavery report and Colonial Countryside project, both of which presented a negative and guilt-ridden view of Britain’s past, were followed by general decolonisation initiatives at a number of Trust sites in the wake of BLM protests of 2020. These included the addition by Trust curators

111 Peepal Tree Press. *Colonial Countryside*. Available online at: <<https://www.peepaltreepress.com/books/colonial-countryside>> [Accessed 3 September 2024].

112 CivicLeicester, 2018. *Colonial Countryside: English Country Houses Reinterpreted*. [Video] Available online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/CivicLeicester/videos/colonial-countryside-english-country-houses-reinterpreted/1826129034075138/>> [Accessed 2 February 2024].

of labels and signs to some properties and items in their collections to highlight their links to slavery and colonialism, without providing sufficient context or balance. Sometimes the Trust claimed that objects were offensive and inappropriate, seemingly apologising to visitors for their being on display.

One example is the plaque that was put up beside the Egyptian-style *torchères* at Cliveden, in Buckinghamshire, which appeared to regret being unable to hide away the statues due to their Grade I listing:

*“Today, the depiction of black people in European sculpture causes upset and distress to many. We don’t want to censor or deny the way colonial histories are woven into the fabric of our places. Cliveden, including these statues, is Grade I listed, meaning it has been identified as nationally significant. So, we’re working to redisplay and reinterpret these statues in a way that acknowledges the appalling histories of slavery and the slave trade. We invite you to consider what they represent about British and global history.”*

**Figure 29:** The sundial at Dunham Massey before removal.



**Figure 30:** The stand and plaque, still in the place of the sundial at Dunham Massey.



At Dunham Massey in Cheshire, a Grade II-listed sundial which features a kneeling African (see Figure 29) was removed in 2020, and a plaque in its place explained that the Trust had “temporarily removed the sundial to protect it from harm after complaints about the man’s subjugated pose”. Yet, over four years later, the sundial remains hidden away while the supposedly temporary wooden stand and explanatory plaque still stands, albeit dirty and weathered (see Figure 30).

At Dyrham Park, every effort has been made to link objects to slavery and colonialism, even in the most contrived ways. An exhibit named “Reimagining Dutch still life”, which consists of objects laid out on a dinner table, provides an excuse for gratuitous mention of “enslaved African people” and “enslaved labour” in every caption, as the curators chose to feature sugar, chocolate and coffee in the spread (see Figure 31).

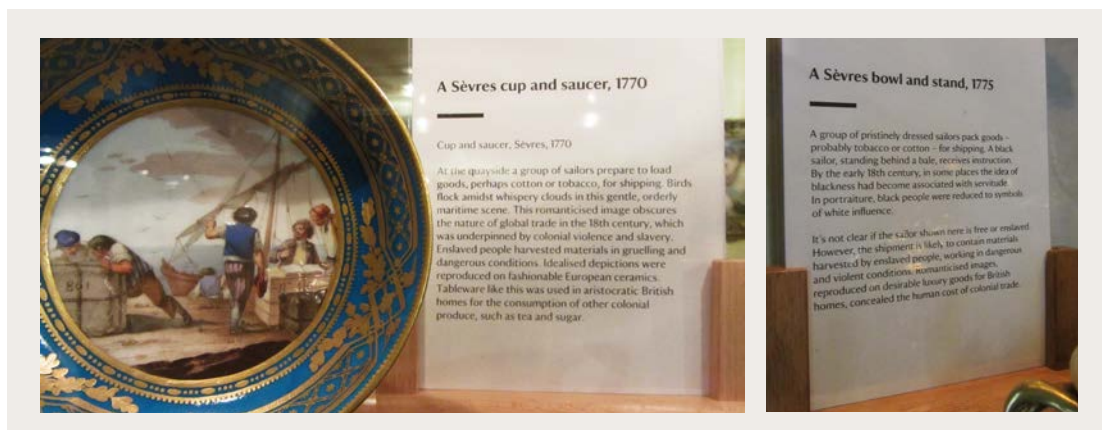


**Figure 31: Captions at Dyrham Park.**

The aim of the curators at Dyrham appears to be to sully the reputation and legacy of its former owner William Blathwayt. However, as Calvin Po points out:

*“Apart from Blathwayt’s duties in the Plantations Office which were primarily bureaucratic, concerned with taxation and auditing, in terms of his direct links to slavery, the Trust admits that he briefly “considered investing in cocoa production” in Jamaica until he “abandoned his plans, believing the investment too financially risky.” In other words, try as hard as they might with insinuation and innuendo, Blaythwayt could not be pinned with the charge of having actually owned any slaves.”*<sup>113</sup>

Similarly, Upton House in Banbury has irrelevant mention of slavery wherever the visitor turns, with the premise for its mention based mostly on conjecture. Examples include a caption which reads, “At the quayside a group of sailors prepare to load goods, *perhaps cotton or tobacco*, for shipping. [...] This romanticised image obscures the nature of global trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was underpinned by colonial violence and slavery”, as well as another suggesting of an image depicted on a bowl that “It’s not clear if the sailor shown here is free or enslaved. However, the shipment is likely to contain materials harvested by enslaved people”<sup>114</sup> (see Figure 32).

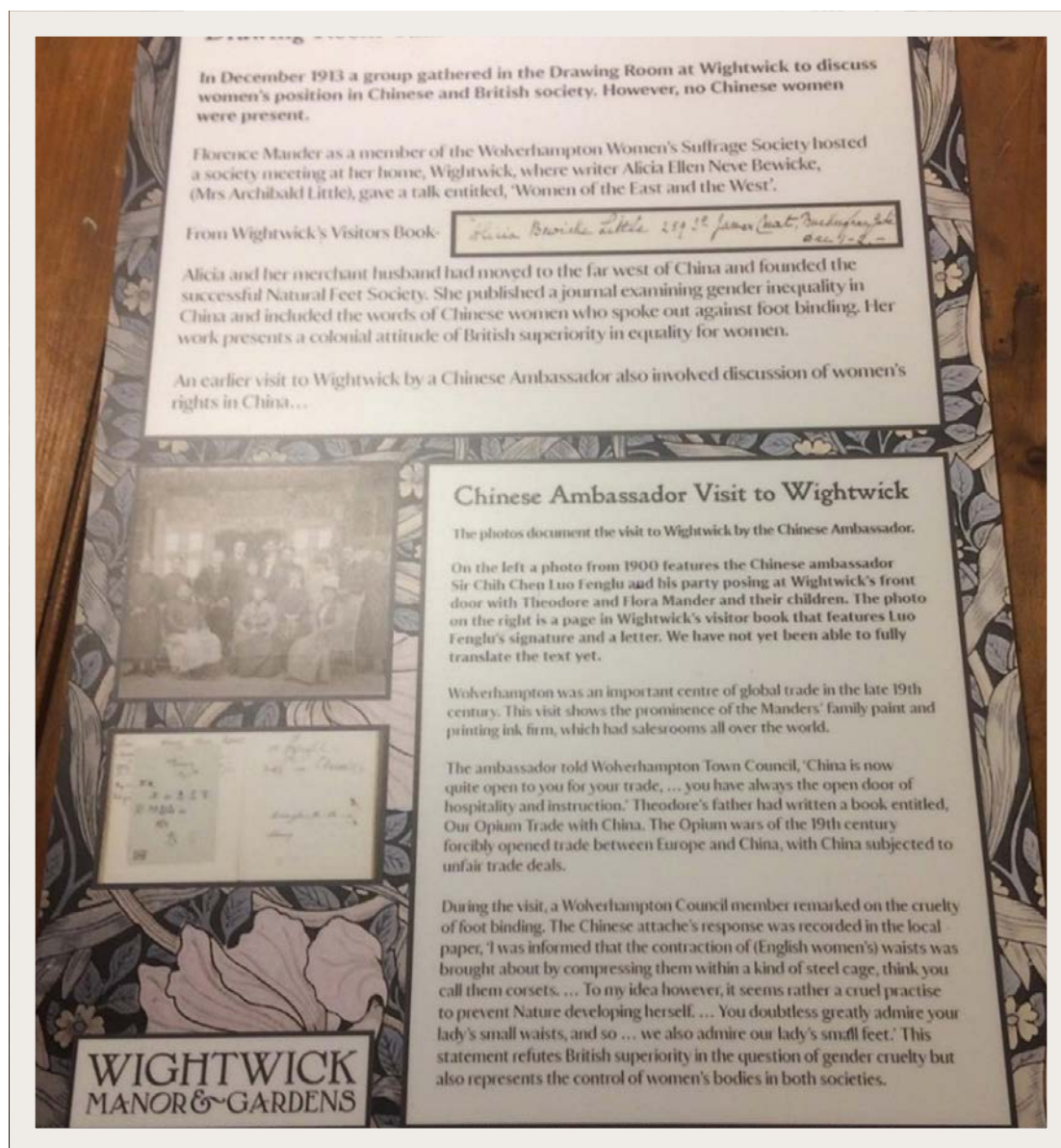
**Figure 32: Captions at Upton House.**

<sup>113</sup> Po, C., 2024. “Left to Fallow: A Visit to Dyrham Park”. *The Critic*, 12 June. Available online at: <<https://thecritic.co.uk/the-national-trust-should-act-its-age/>> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

<sup>114</sup> Emphasis added.



Figure 33: Poster at Wightwick Manor.



At Wightwick Manor in Wolverhampton, a poster on "Women of the East and the West" (see Figure 33) states that:

*"Alicia [Ellen Neve Bewicke, aka Mrs Archibald Little] and her merchant husband had moved to the far west of China and founded the Natural Foot Society. She published a journal examining gender inequality in China and included the words of Chinese women who spoke out against foot binding. Her work presents a colonial attitude of British superiority in equality for women."*

This disturbingly relativistic sentence has no place in an account of a historic figure who was fighting for the abolition of foot binding and therefore for the betterment of women, irrespective of their background. However, it would seem that an inherently anti-colonial narrative – and indeed one which undermines British history more generally – is being propagated by Trust curators.

That the re-interpretation of history by the Trust has largely been done with a desire to reach pre-determined conclusions rather than as part of an open-minded quest to discover new

facts is shown by an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded PhD studentship advertised by the Trust in 2019 for Cambridge students. Titled “Shugborough Hall, the Ansons and the eighteenth-century Atlantic economy”, the advert sought applicants who would actively look for links between the Anson family – focussing on a younger brother of one of the former owners of Shugborough – and slavery.<sup>115</sup> Pointing out that “initial research has not produced definitive evidence of the Ansons’ direct involvement in the slave trade”, it stated that:

*“This PhD project provides an opportunity to place Shugborough into a wider global network and explore the structures of consumption and exploitation that helped to create it. It can serve as a micro-historical case-study for the influence and domestic impact of imperialism, as well as contributing to wider discussions about the legacies of slavery and the profits that elite families derived from it.”<sup>116</sup>*

The job advert also suggested that an interest in “the history of race” would strengthen a candidate’s application.<sup>117</sup>

In many cases, there has been no pretence that the Trust’s decolonisation projects are providing meaningful expansions of historical knowledge, with trendy initiatives instead such as art installations which simply purport to remind visitors about the difficult “histories” of Trust properties. One example is Powis Castle, which in 2024 put on an exhibition called “A Tiger in the Castle”, apparently “responding to Powis Castle’s colonial connection to India” and featuring photographs of artist Daniel Trivedy dressed in a tiger costume in the castle (see Figure 34).<sup>118</sup> These photographs were accompanied by “a writer’s poetic response by Lauren Craig which unpacks deeper meanings behind the artist’s performance”.<sup>119</sup> The Trust’s website explains that:

*“The tiger acts as a powerful motif, connecting to the artist’s identity as a person of Indian descent and directly referencing objects in the South Asian Collection at Powis Castle. During the British colonisation of India, tigers were declared as vermin, leading to a significant decline in their population numbers. Daniel’s work is an engaging and playful form of disruption. The exhibition aligns with the artist’s re-imagining of Powis Castle as a potential site of learning and social cohesion. The work has come about through a partnership between Artes Mundi, the international flagship visual arts organisation in Wales, National Trust Cymru and the artist.”<sup>120</sup>*

115 Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership, 2019. *Shugborough Hall, the Ansons and the eighteenth-century Atlantic economy*. Available online at: <<https://www.oocdtp.ac.uk/shugborough-hall-ansons-and-eighteenth-century-atlantic-economy>> [Accessed 30 August 2024].

116 *Ibid.*

117 *Ibid.*

118 National Trust. *Trust New Art exhibitions and events*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/whats-on/trust-new-art-exhibitions-and-events>> [Accessed 5 August 2024]; National Trust. *Exhibitions at Powis Castle*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wales/powis-castle-and-garden/exhibitions-at-powis-castle>> [Accessed 5 August 2024].

119 *Ibid.*

120 *Ibid.*

**Figure 34:** Photographs featuring in the “A Tiger in the Castle” exhibition at Powis Castle.<sup>121</sup>



It is clear that the intention of the curators is often to pit Britain against ethnic communities who have allegedly been wronged, fomenting respective feelings of guilt and resentment, rather than – as claimed – deepening understanding of history or even finding common ground. Instead of simply celebrating the non-British origin objects in the Trust's historic collections, the Trust's curators appear to have taken the opportunity to provoke mini-culture wars.

One example of such a site is Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, home to over 1,000 objects of Asian origin which were meticulously curated by Lord Curzon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2023 Curzon's life and legacy was reinterpreted by the Trust through an exhibition called “My Adornment is My Power”, with the artefacts he amassed over his lifetime interspersed with contemporary creations by British-Asian jewellery designer Anisha Parmar, who also curated the exhibition, and large photographs of dancer Kesha Rathatha wearing some of the original collection. In the promotional video, Parmar explained that “I guess the legacy of the project for me is to challenge some of the thought processes around our dark histories linked to colonialism, Empire”<sup>122</sup> She asserted that “These objects have energies” and wondered “How can we make them feel at home here in a place that is unfamiliar?”<sup>123</sup> Photographer Ofilaye, who is a “long-term collaborator with

| 121 *Ibid.*

| 122 Parmar, A., 2023. “My Adornment is my Power”. *Anisha Parmar*, 20 March. Available online at: <<https://www.anishaparmar.com/blogs/news/my-adornment-is-my-power?srltid=AfmBOopREs-zX-Nyw2Hqdp3dyqjVKvuucKdFwO317GoOo3ii-eWo50E>> [Accessed 5 July 2024].

| 123 *Ibid.*



Anisha Parmar” and who led the production of the audio-visual content in the exhibition, wrote that “working on this project was a great opportunity to unearth some of the hidden histories that intertwine with the heritage of Kedleston Hall and its former residents” (see Figure 35).<sup>124</sup> It does not appear that Parmar or her associates made any discoveries in relation to the objects and it is therefore not clear that the exhibition did unearth any “dark” or “hidden histories”. Once again, the National Trust allowed and encouraged an exhibition with anti-British rhetoric and sinister undertones – albeit under the guise of an innocent, celebratory programme – without justification.

**Figure 35:** A graphic featuring Ofilaye and advertising the “My Adornment is My Power” exhibition at Kedleston Hall, for which he was the photographer.<sup>125</sup>



History is constantly presented by the Trust through the lens of modern identity politics. At Runnymede in Surrey, the birthplace of the Magna Carta, the National Trust commissioned Hew Locke to produce an artwork called “The Jurors” (see Figure 36): twelve bronze chairs with “an invitation to sit down and reflect upon the histories depicted in the artwork”.<sup>126</sup> Ostensibly

| 124 Ibid.

| 125 Ibid.

| 126 National Trust. *The Jurors at Runnymede*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/surrey/runnymede-and-anker-wycke/the-jurors-at-runnymede>> [19 July 2024].

"examin[ing] the changing and ongoing significance of Magna Carta", the chairs' fronts and backs are covered in depictions of objects, individuals, events and themes such as the following:

- "Lillie Lenton, wearing medals and bandages symbolising the imprisonment and activism of suffragettes";
- "the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child";
- "the 1989 oil spillage in the Gulf of Alaska when the Exxon Valdez tanker ran aground";
- "the first woman to practise law in India";
- "the march of blind trade unionists who converged on Trafalgar Square in 1920 in support of the Blind Persons Act";
- "an Amerindian headdress, forest and a river clustered with gold nuggets, representing the indigenous land claims that have been addressed since colonisation";
- "the first published African-American woman";
- "the first black woman to write and publish an autobiography";
- "a portable charkha, or hand spinning wheel for cotton, designed by Mahatma Gandhi and used as a political symbol of resistance to British imported goods and British rule";
- "a loudhailer belonging to Harvey Milk, gay rights campaigner and first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California [words missing] from 1977-78";
- "Nelson Mandela's prison cell";
- "a boat carrying refugees";
- "the striking hollow boob tree found in Australia. These trees were adapted in the 1890s by police for use as temporary prisons for aboriginal prisoners. Each date and name refers to the ever-developing history of aboriginal Australians, their land and human rights"; and
- "the ship Zong, from which 133 slaves were thrown overboard in 1781. The owners made an insurance claim for the loss of their human cargo and the resulting legal case caused public outcry. On the sails, the west African symbol Epa represents captivity, law and justice".<sup>127</sup>

**Figure 36:** *"The Jurors" at Runnymede.*

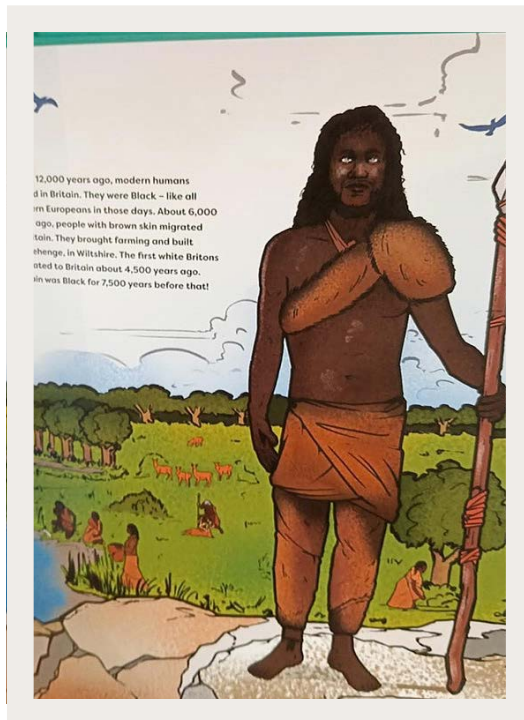




The justification for such overt engagement in identity politics does not seem clear, and history appears to be being used simply as a cover, the supposed Magna Carta link to each being tenuous in the extreme. Moreover, the bronze chairs have come at the expense of the Trust's proper work of conserving heritage.

The curators at various properties, including Tyntesfield House (see Figure 37), have also been engaging in revisionist history by stocking in their bookshop *Brilliant Black British History*, a children's book which claims that "About 12,000 years ago, modern humans settled in Britain. They were Black – like all Western Europeans in those days. About 6,000 years ago, people with brown skin migrated to Britain. They brought farming and built Stonehenge, in Wiltshire. The first white Britons migrated to Britain about 4,500 years ago. Britain was Black for 7,500 years before that!". There is no justification for the National Trust to be legitimising such provocative - and completely inaccurate - historical narratives..

**Figure 37:** A page from "*Brilliant Black British History*", stocked in the bookshop at Tyntesfield House among other Trust properties.



That the mishandling of history is a top-down issue within the Trust rather than a curatorial problem confined to a few sites is indicated not only by the Colonial Countryside project and slavery report, but also other Trust-wide programmes. In 2018, the Trust published a booklet called "*Women and Power*", which aimed to celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage and highlighted Trust properties' links with individuals involved in the fight for suffrage; the final page featured a contemporary photograph of women at an anti-Trump protest dressed up as suffragettes. Given that there is no shortage of historic photographs of genuine suffragettes, this would appear to be a contrived way to send a political message that in fact has nothing to do with the subject of the booklet itself.

"Disability history" has been another cause for side-track. The Trust-commissioned film *Everywhere and Nowhere*, released in January 2023, "brings to the forefront some items from the collections in our care which represent the stories of disabled people" was "commissioned as part of the National Trust's work to share diverse, underexplored and untold stories from the places and collections in its care, and the people who have shaped them throughout history".<sup>128</sup> One of the "untold stories" supposedly uncovered by the film was the fact that Henry VIII was a disabled man, when in reality the impact of his jousting accident of 1536 has been explored extensively in

<sup>128</sup> University of Leicester, 2023. *National Trust and University of Leicester launch pioneering film to explore fascinating stories of disability from the Trust's sites and collections for the first time*. 16 January. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/news/2023/january/everywhere-nowhere>> [Accessed 26 May 2024].

historical accounts of the King's life.

The decolonisation and historical reinterpretation was undertaken against the backdrop of a new "Everyone welcome" strategy at the Trust: in an eponymous article for a Trust members' magazine from 2020 (see Appendix), Tiger de Souza – then the Trust's Volunteering, Participation and Inclusion Director – argued that the Trust's management "have two responsibilities. The first is to make sure everyone feels welcome at the National Trust. [...] Our second responsibility is to present the colonial history of our places in a thoughtful way that promotes productive debate and reflection". This is a fundamentally flawed interpretation of the Trust's responsibilities, outlined in the introduction. Yet it has been the justification for the pursuit of several seemingly irrelevant initiatives, often pushing a particular strand of identity politics.

## ii. Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives

Another element of the Trust's virtue-signalling has taken the form of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. One of the main themes that the Trust has been championing in recent years is that of "LGBTQ+" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) history and rights. In 2017, the Trust launched a national public programme, "Prejudice and Pride", to mark the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales: an event of no relevance to the Trust and to heritage preservation.<sup>129</sup> The programme involved exhibitions, events, podcasts and publications that aimed to highlight the LGBTQ+ heritage of some of the Trust's properties and collections. The Trust's leadership claimed that it enhanced the perception that the Trust tells diverse and inclusive stories about its cultural heritage.

A closer examination of some of the Prejudice and Pride activities would suggest that they were seen more as a means of virtue-signalling than being about scholarly research. In 2017, volunteers at Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk were ordered to wear rainbow lanyards in celebration of Pride Month and especially in commemoration of the supposedly homosexual last squire of the Hall, Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer.<sup>130</sup> Those unwilling to do so were relegated to the back areas of the properties so that they would not be seen by visitors. Annabel Smith, the Trust's Head of Volunteering and Participation Development, defended this distinctly anti-"inclusion" edict by arguing that "All of our staff and volunteers sign up to our founding principles when they join us - we are an organisation that is for ever, for everyone. We are committed to developing and promoting equality of opportunity and inclusion in all that we do."<sup>131</sup> Members of the Ketton-Cremer family challenged the National Trust's assertion about their forbear's private life and expressed offence at the Trust-commissioned film "An Unfinished Portrait", narrated by Stephen Fry, which had presented the theory about his sexuality as fact.<sup>132</sup> Uproar among volunteers, members and the public alike – and the resulting media coverage – led to a quick reversal by the management of the diktat on enforced wearing of rainbow lanyards.<sup>133</sup>

129 University of Leicester, 2023. *Prejudice & Pride: exploring LGBTQ lives at the National Trust*. 16 January. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/prejudice-and-pride>> [Accessed 2 May 2024].

130 BBC, 2017. *National Trust volunteers refuse to wear LGBTQ badges*. 4 August. Available online at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-40825660>> [Accessed 8 May 2023].

131 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-40825660>

132 Moore, C., Levy, A., Brown, L. and Greenhill, S., 2017. "National Trust U-turns on forcing volunteers to wear Gay Pride badges after days of pressure, saying donning the rainbow flag is now an 'optional and personal decision'". *Daily Mail*, 5 August. Available online at: <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4763496/National-Trust-U-turns-Gay-Pride-badge-policy.html>> [Accessed 7 May 2024].

133 *Ibid.*

**Figure 38:** National Trust staff joining 2022 “Pride” activities.<sup>134</sup>



The issue at Felbrigg was not simply about the Trust management's attempt to force volunteers to conform to a particular viewpoint or ideology. Even if there had been no coercion involved, it is not within the Trust's remit to be producing items – whether badges, lanyards, posters, T-shirts, flags or balloons (see Figure 38) – which endorse any particular political stance;<sup>135</sup> the Trust, according to its statutory and charitable objects, is and should be concerned with the preservation of heritage, and

should not be getting side-tracked from this mission by irrelevant agendas and spending any time and resources on promoting these, which the Trust has continued to do despite the climb-down over the lanyards. In 2018 the Trust even held an LGBTQ conference:

*The Prejudice, Pride, Place Conference, a joint event between RCMG and the National Trust, took place on 15-16 May 2018 at The Bond Warehouse in Birmingham and at the National Trust properties - Hanbury Hall, Worcestershire and Wightwick Manor, Wolverhampton. It explored how heritage organisations can meaningfully engage diverse audiences in debates surrounding LGBTQ history, culture and equality by researching and presenting past LGBTQ lives. The Conference also featured the first performance of girl.boy.child by historian and respected singer songwriter David McAlmont, commissioned by Richard Sandell.*<sup>136</sup>

“girl.boy.child” was a seven-minute “documentary” that was commissioned by the Trust to promote LGBTQ+ history linked to its sites – the three figures in its title are somehow meant to represent Christabel Marshall (who styled herself Christopher St John) and the aforementioned William John Banks and Henry Cyril Paget, respectively – and which in the words of the “Prejudice and Pride” project lead Professor Richard Sandell represented a “collective attempt to push back against the forces – the prejudice and stigma that have actively obscured, suppressed and silenced queer lives not only in museums, galleries and heritage sites but more broadly in the public realm – and which continue to do so”.<sup>137</sup> It is not clear how the spending of time and resources on such activities can be justified, especially when the charity is proving unable to carry out even its most

<sup>134</sup> National Trust, 2022. [X post] 27 September. Available online at: <<https://x.com/nationaltrust/status/1574712886559051776>> [Accessed on 18 July 2024].

<sup>135</sup> The Trust's management actively encourages its staff to participate in annual Pride marches and activities while representing the charity, and makes suggestions to property managers about how they might celebrate Pride publicly at their properties.

<sup>136</sup> University of Leicester, 2023. *Prejudice & Pride: exploring LGBTQ lives at the National Trust*. 16 January. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/prejudice-and-pride>> [Accessed 2 May 2024].

<sup>137</sup> University of Leicester. *Outside and beyond: Girl. Boy. Child: a poignant queer tale for our times*. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/museum-studies/research/case-studies/outside-and-beyond>> [Accessed 2 May 2024].

basic conservation duties.

Another example of the Trust's unnecessary probing into benefactors' private lives was the sensationalised 2017 "EXILE" exhibition at Kingston Lacy in Dorset, which presented the life of William John Bankes – who fled to continental Europe in 1841 after being caught with a soldier in a sexual act – purely through the lens of his sexual proclivity.<sup>138</sup> The exhibition featured a contemporary art installation by Julie Howell called "In Memoriam" and consisting of 51 lengths of rope supposedly representing the homosexuals who were hanged.<sup>139</sup> The overriding focus on Bankes' private life – and by extension the general LGBTQ+ theme – would seem wholly disproportionate.

An even more inexplicable foray by the Trust into LGBTQ+ history – given that it was not even on a Trust site – was its 2017 project recreating the so-called Caravan Club, a "lesbian and gay friendly members' club" in Soho.<sup>140</sup> There does not appear to have been any justification for the Trust to have undertaken such a project.

The Trust's LGBTQ+ activism has endured beyond "Prejudice and Pride". In 2023, the Trust launched its "Space to Have a Ball" project, which centred around a film featuring "drag" artists dancing in National Trust properties (see Figure 39), with no clear relevance to the Trust's duties of heritage preservation.<sup>141</sup>

**Figure 39:** Still from the "Space to Have a Ball" film featuring male "drag" artist. <sup>142</sup>



Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, a Trust curator and co-Chair of the charity's LGBTQ+ network, is quoted as having said:

*"Space to Have a Ball is a thrilling response to the history of three Georgian era National Trust properties, the period when the first, recognisable, Queer communities formed in Britain. Osterley Park and Bath Assembly Rooms hosted scintillating social gatherings, where outrageous fashions,*

<sup>138</sup> University of Leicester. *EXILE at Kingston Lacy*. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/exile-at-kingston-lacy>> [Accessed 6 May 2024].

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Jupp, E., 2017. "Historic haven for Soho's repressed gays is remembered thanks to National Trust recreation of The Caravan Club". *iNews*, 2 March. Available online at: <<https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/the-caravan-club-gay-soho-london-national-trust-50256>> [Accessed 6 May 2024].

<sup>141</sup> National Trust, 2023. *Space to Have a Ball: everyone's invited to the National Trust's ballrooms – recreated at Outernet London for Pride celebrations*. 15 June. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/space-to-have-a-ball>> [Accessed 4 April 2024].

<sup>142</sup> Casseb, P., 2023. *BTS – "Space To Have A Ball" @nationaltrustcharity Pride Campaign*. [Video] 16 July. Available online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=tXiQQtcsOM>> [Accessed 4 April 2024].

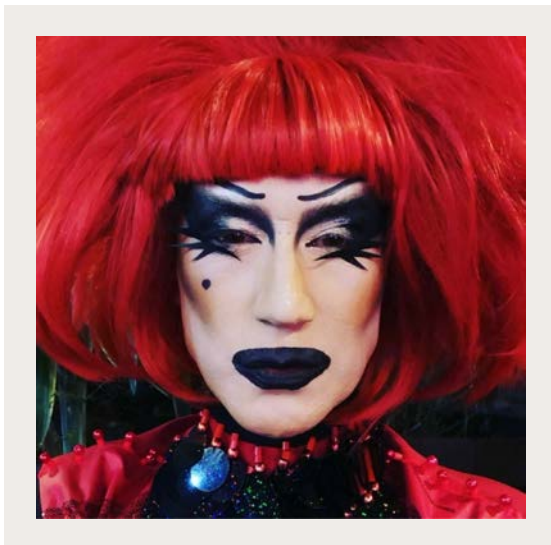


*music and beautiful architecture transported the participants of the parties held there. Likewise, the extravagant, gilded and art-filled interiors of Kingston Lacy speak of the overwhelming need of owner William Banks to create his own beautiful vision of personal identity. The film's dancers and directors have brought back into these rooms the spirits of self-expression and spectacle that were so central to how they historically functioned. We're excited to be able to share the history of three National Trust places in a very different way with visitors to Outernet this Pride Month.*"<sup>143</sup>

The claim that "the first, recognisable, Queer communities formed in Britain" in the Georgian era is not backed up by historical evidence. It would appear that imaginary historical accounts are being used to justify the side-tracking of the Trust from its core duties and towards curators' personal interests.

In 2024, an exhibition celebrating the life of the transvestite artist and "drag queen" Twiggy (see Figure 40) opened at the Trust-owned Birmingham Back to Backs. In a now-deleted blog, the Trust said that "As an instantly recognisable figure of Birmingham's nightlife and Pride celebrations, Twiggy is a legend of Birmingham's LGBTQ+ community" and invited visitors to "follow Twiggy's journey from inspired shop assistant [...] to the powerhouse of flamboyance they are today, defying boundaries of gender and stereotype".<sup>144</sup>

**Figure 40:** Transvestite artist "Twiggy", about whom the National Trust held an exhibition at its Birmingham Back to Backs.



The Trust has once more undermined its reputation by allowing the sites in its care to be used as platforms for publicity stunts that have little or no relevance to its core mission.

That the National Trust has never been exclusionary to people from any background is significant because it means that there is even less justification for identity politics. Nevertheless, the Trust appears, like many organisations in the cultural sector, to have subscribed to DEI ideology, and applied it to much of what they do.

Such rhetoric has provided the foundation for the roll-out of schemes such as mandatory "Everyday Inclusion" training for volunteers, focussing on "diversity", "inclusivity" and "unconscious bias".<sup>145</sup> When the roll-out was first announced in 2021, volunteers were sent threats that if they

<sup>143</sup> National Trust, 2023. *Space to Have a Ball: everyone's invited to the National Trust's ballrooms – recreated at Outernet London for Pride celebrations*. 15 June. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/space-to-have-a-ball>> [Accessed 4 April 2024].

<sup>144</sup> National Trust, 2024. *Exhibition – Twiggy – The Drag Market*. 29 January. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/birmingham-west-midlands/birmingham-back-to-backs/twiggy---the-drag-market>> [Accessed 15 February].

<sup>145</sup> Newman, J., 2021. "National Trust orders volunteers to take diversity training to 'raise awareness' of their 'unintended biases' – even including rangers who do not work with the public". *Daily Mail*, 14 April. Available online at: <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9468399/National-Trust-orders-volunteers-diversity-training-raise-awareness-biases.html>> [Accessed 17 May 2024].

did not complete the training within a given time frame, they would be suspended.<sup>146</sup> It is difficult to justify this decision, not least given that many volunteers had already been with the Trust for decades and found the training patronising and meaningless; it is also ironic that training supposedly on inclusion should exclude the apolitical or those who prefer not to be told what to think. That the supposed training has been of an objectively low standard is shown by errors in the training materials such as a reference to people who “suffer from mental health”; the use of “curious of” in place of “curious about”; and “not quiet” instead of “not quite”.<sup>147</sup>

A further cause for disillusionment among volunteers was the 2023 “Inclusion and wellbeing calendar” distributed among volunteers and staff, which highlighted three different LGBTQ-related events, two Muslim religious festivals, “Pain Awareness Month”, “World Menopause Day”, and other little-known ldays while omitting Christmas and Easter (see Figure 41). In response to complaints about this, the Trust’s management blamed “misleading articles” for the “misunderstanding”:

*“The Inclusion and Wellbeing Calendar is an internal resource, used to keep staff and volunteers up to date about awareness months and minority religious and cultural celebrations they might not otherwise be familiar with. For this reason, Christmas and Easter, which are national holidays, are not included on the calendar. We know that most of our staff and volunteers have a good awareness and understanding of these festivals already.”<sup>148</sup>*

This is disingenuous: the 2022 inclusion and wellbeing calendar did include both of those Christian religious festivals (see Figure 42). Nevertheless, the fact that the Trust should include such contentious “celebrations” as “Transgender Awareness Week” indicates the ideological capture of the Trust’s senior management. The Inclusion and wellbeing calendar is a helpful tool for understanding where the Trust’s “inclusion” priorities lie, but also how distracted the Trust’s management appears to be from its core duties.

**Figure 41:** National Trust Inclusion and Wellbeing Calendar 2023.

 **Inclusion and wellbeing calendar 2023**

Some of the **internal** and **external** moments we will be recognising in our communications channels

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
	<b>Feb:</b> Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans (LGBT+) History Month <b>2:</b> Time to Talk Day <b>6-12:</b> Race Equality Week	<b>8:</b> International Women's Day <b>20:</b> Spring Equinox <b>22 Mar-20 Apr:</b> Ramadan	<b>21-22:</b> Eid <b>25 Apr-1 May:</b> MS (Multiple Sclerosis) Awareness Week	<b>2-8:</b> Deaf Awareness Week <b>8-21:</b> Inclusion Fortnight 'This is Us' <b>15-21:</b> Mental Health Awareness Week	<b>Jun:</b> LGBTQ+ Pride Month <b>NT Pride Week</b> <b>5-11:</b> Carers Week

Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
<b>18 Jul-17 Aug:</b> South Asian Heritage Month	<b>12:</b> International Youth Day	<b>Sep:</b> Pain Awareness Month <b>23:</b> Autumn Equinox	<b>Oct:</b> Black History Month <b>18:</b> World Menopause Day	<b>Nov:</b> Diabetes Awareness Month <b>13:</b> Diwali <b>13-19:</b> Transgender Awareness Week <b>20:</b> World Children's Day <b>20-26:</b> Safeguarding Week	<b>16 Nov-16 Dec:</b> UK Disability History Month <b>7-15:</b> Hanukkah

| 146 *Ibid.*

| 147 Email from Trust volunteer, 22 December 2022.

| 148 National Trust, 2023. *National Trust*. Trustpilot, 14 November. Available online at: <<https://uk.trustpilot.com/review/www.national-trust.org.uk?page=9>> [4 August 2024].

**Figure 42:** National Trust Inclusion and Wellbeing Calendar 2022.

 **Inclusion and wellbeing calendar 2022**  
Some of the **internal** and **external** moments we will be recognising in our communications channels

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
17: Blue Monday	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans (LGBT+) History Month <b>31 Jan – 13 Feb:</b> Inclusion Fortnight 'This Is Us' 1: Chinese New Year 7: Time to Talk Day 7-13: Race Equality Week	8: International Women's Day 18: World Sleep Day	Autism Awareness Month 2: World Autism Awareness Day 1-30: Ramadan (Islam) 15-23: Passover (Judaism) 17: Easter Sunday (Christian)	3: Eid (Islam) 11: National Day for Staff Networks 15: National Children's Day 13-20: Mental Health Awareness Week	LGBTQ+ Pride Month 1-7: Volunteers Week 7-12: Carers Week <b>27 Jun – 3 July: NT Pride Week</b>
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
18: South Asian Heritage Month begins	12: International Youth Day 17: South Asian Heritage Month ends 23: International Day of Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Abolition of Slavery	World Alzheimer's Awareness Month 10: World Suicide Prevention Day 21: World Alzheimer's Day <b>26 Sep-2 Oct:</b> National Inclusion Week	Black History Month ADHD Awareness Month 10: World Mental Health Day 18: World Menopause Day 24: Diwali (Hindu, Sikh, Jain)	2: Purple Tuesday 18: UK Disability History Month begins 13-19: Transgender Awareness Week 20: International Children's Day 21-27: Safeguarding Week	18: UK Disability History Month ends 18-26: Hanukkah (Judaism) 25: Christmas Day (Christian)

Coupled with the general falling standards within the Trust and the change in approach by management, the imposition of highly ideological initiatives on volunteers has contributed to the recent volunteer exodus, which has impaired the Trust's ability to carry out its duties. Table 1 shows a steady decline in volunteer numbers from 2018, which is impossible to ascribe mainly to Covid: even before the pandemic, between 2018–19 and 2019–20, there was a decline of 12,000 (from 65,000<sup>149</sup> to 53,000<sup>150</sup>); between 2019–20 and 2020–21, in which period the Trust was most affected by the pandemic, there was a decline in volunteer numbers of only 3,000<sup>151</sup>; whereas from 2020–21 to 2021–22, during which time the Trust introduced its controversial "unconscious bias" training, there was a fall of 6,000 to 44,000<sup>152</sup> (the lowest in a decade). The updated Charity Commission entry for the period 2023–2024 shows that volunteer numbers have declined even further, now falling below 40,000.<sup>153</sup>

**Table 1:** The decline of volunteer numbers in the National Trust.

Year	No. of volunteers in the National Trust
2018–19	65,000
2019–20	53,000
2020–21	50,000
2021–22	44,000 (lowest in a decade)
2022–23	– (omitted from Annual Report)
2023–24	Under 40,000

The chronic volunteer shortages have led in recent years to reduced public access to many

| 149 National Trust Annual Report 2018–19, p.4.

| 150 National Trust Annual Report 2019–20, p.15.

| 151 National Trust Annual Report 2020–21, p.20.

| 152 National Trust Annual Report 2021–22, p.10.

| 153 Charity Commission. *The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty*. Available online at: <<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/sector-data/top-10-charities/-/charity-details/205846/charity-overview>> [Accessed 22 October 2024].

The Annual Report of 2023–24 (p.32) misleadingly states that "This year we **welcomed** almost 40,000 volunteers [emphasis added]", which makes it seem as though there were 40,000 *new* volunteers, whereas the Charity Commission entry states that in fact the total volunteer workforce for that year was under 40,000.

properties which were formerly open in full, with a few examples including Upton House, Attingham Park, Hinton Ampner and Shugborough Hall. This proves that far from being harmless and benign, the Trust's pursuit of trendy activism has actively undermined its ability to carry out its core purposes.

### iii. Environmental activism

Another area in which the Trust has been politicised is in relation to climate change. The Trust's management has repeatedly criticised government policy in public on this subject. In 2022, for example, Hilary McGrady made a statement in response to the government's lifting of the fracking ban in which she threatened to mobilise millions of Trust supporters against the government:

*"We've got 5.7 million members, many of whom are loyal Conservative voters. And many of them are writing to me on a daily basis saying, 'We want to do more here'. They're very willing to get in behind and support a bigger campaign. I have held back from doing that at the minute. But I am prepared to."*<sup>154</sup>

Not only should McGrady not be making such a blatantly political statement, given that fracking has no direct relevance to the work of the Trust, but it is an abuse of power for the Director-General of a huge national charity to claim to speak on behalf of millions of the charity's members.

In spite of the backlash to McGrady's fracking remarks, in July 2023 the National Trust participated in the issuing of a joint threat, alongside the RSPB, RSPCA and other charities, to the then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak that they would mobilise their supposed total of 20 million members<sup>155</sup> to oppose the government if it watered down its climate commitments.<sup>156</sup> Once again, it is not the job of the National Trust to be mobilising members for political causes.

In the summer of 2024, the National Trust enthusiastically advertised and supported the so-called "Restore Nature Now" march – fronted by Chris Packham and Caroline Lucas, among others – in central London, with the organisation's Director of Communications publicly calling on people to join in (see Figure 43) and McGrady appearing via webcast on the day to encourage participants to "make your voice heard".<sup>157</sup> What the National Trust omitted to mention, including in its press release which quoted the Trust's Director of Land and Nature as saying that the march was "yet another powerful demonstration of how much people care about nature and want our leaders to take action to reverse nature's decline",<sup>158</sup> was that the march had been organised by the highly controversial group Extinction Rebellion (XR).

154 Spencer, B., 2022. "National Trust chief says Truss is 'demonising' conservationists. *The Times*, 9 October. Available online at: <<https://www.thetimes.com/article/national-trust-chief-says-truss-is-demonising-conservationists-kxp9wz8fz>> [30 July 2024].

155 Whether this figure has taken into account the significant overlap between memberships of the difference organisations, or whether it includes double- or triple-counting, is not clear.

156 Rawlinson, K., 2023. "Nature groups prepared to 'mobilise' 20m members over UK climate policy". *The Guardian*, 29 July. Available online at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/29/nature-groups-prepared-to-mobilise-members-over-uk-climate-policy>> [Accessed 15 June 2024].

157 Extinction Rebellion (XR) UK, 2024. *LIVE: Historic Demonstration for Nature Restoration | Extinction Rebellion & Over 300 Allies Unite!* [Video] 22 June. Available online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xolcc5sLaXU>> [accessed 1 December 2024].

158 National Trust, 2024. *Over 60,000 people march to parliament to demand politicians Restore Nature Now*. [press release] 22 June. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/restore-nature-now-pr>> [Accessed 1 December 2024].



**Figure 43:** Example of a tweet by Celia Richardson, the National Trust's Director of Communications, encouraging involvement in the "Restore Nature Now" protest.<sup>159</sup>



While mention of XR has been conspicuously absent from the Restore Nature Now website, creating a semblance of independence to the general public, in its interactions with supporters the campaign group took full credit for organising the march and rally (see Figure 44).<sup>160</sup> During an open call aimed at those joining and volunteering in the march, XR spokeswoman Liz Pendleton said the following:


*"We are coming as XR so we will stand shoulder to shoulder with other organisations and we will be very present as XR so time to turn up in your glorious XR colours. [...] XR has done a number of different events and a number of different actions, so why a march, and why now? Restore Nature Now is not just another event. It is a strategic pivot point. It stands as a beacon of what XR has achieved already. It's a moment that is inclusive, respected and capable of shaping the discourse. Shifts in the Overton window are speeding up [Pendleton laughs] with increasing credibility in approach and a growing perception of XR as leaders capable of influencing both NGOs and political frameworks, paving the way to upgrade democracy from one that is destroying us to one that supports all life on earth and we must do that by bringing people along the NVDA [Non-Violent Direct Action] pathway".<sup>161</sup>*

<sup>159</sup> Richardson, C., 2024. [X post] 24 May. Available online at: <[https://x.com/CeliaRichards0n/status/1794064567724581086](\"https://x.com/CeliaRichards0n/status/1794064567724581086\")> [Accessed 7 December 2024].

<sup>160</sup> Extinction Rebellion (XR) UK, 2024. *RESTORE NATURE NOW ~ OPEN CALL* | Extinction Rebellion UK. [Video] 14 May. Available online at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_91MEvftL0s](\"https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_91MEvftL0s\")> [accessed 1 December 2024].

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

**Figure 44:** Slides from Extinction Rebellion’s pre-march “open call” slideshow.<sup>162</sup>




## WHAT

A MARCH & RALLY

WORKING TOGETHER IN TRUE  
COLLABORATION

NOT XR’S PARTY THIS TIME!

COME AS XR




[WHAT](#) > WHERE > WHEN > WHO > WHY > HOW > WHAT NEXT

## FIRST ASK

PLEASE SIGN UP TO  
BECOME A STEWARD or  
OUTREACH CREW!

Go to **XRUK website**, then  
look for the ‘RESTORE  
NATURE NOW’ button on  
the home page -


Or.... if you can remember it... <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/restore-nature-now/>



**HELP WITH OUTREACH**

Let's get XR's message out there, and help  
people continue their pathway of Non-  
Violent Direct Action

FIND OUT MORE



**BECOME A STEWARD**

Help make the Restore Nature Now march  
safe, inclusive, welcoming for all by  
volunteering

FIND OUT MORE

WHAT > WHERE > WHEN > WHO > WHY > [HOW](#) > WHAT NEXT

This means that XR was at the very centre of the march and indeed one of its aims in organising the rally and obtaining the endorsement of long-standing, respected and large charities in order to increase its own legitimacy in the long term. The National Trust’s readiness to help XR achieve these goals by publicly associating with its actions and by aligning itself with an organisation that has become known for regularly and purposely breaking the law, with several high-profile cases of criminal damage convictions, goes against the responsibility of trustees to ensure that their charity does not put its reputation at risk.

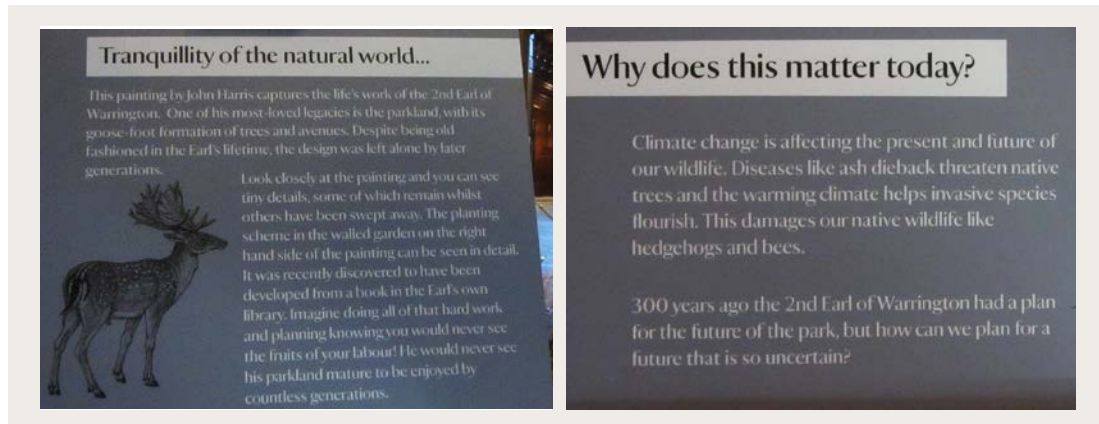
The Trust’s management argues that it is within its rights to make such statements and to participate in such movements, given the supposed threat climate change poses to the green spaces the Trust protects. However, particularly since the Trust is realistically unlikely to have any tangible impact on such a global phenomenon, it remains clear that the charity should focus instead on making sure it is fulfilling its core functions to a high standard.

The Trust management’s environmental activism is not limited to its forays into politicised campaigning. It has also been imposing on visitors climate change messaging that is of little relevance to its sites. For example, at Dunham Massey a sign titled “Tranquillity of the natural

| 162 *Ibid.*

world..." offers the following commentary: "Climate change is affecting the present and future of our wildlife. [...] 300 years ago the 2nd Earl of Warrington had a plan for the future of the park, but how can we plan for a future that is so uncertain?" (see Figure 45). The reality is that climate change has no relevance to the painting which the curators have tried to use as a hook.

**Figure 45:** Sign about climate change at Dunham Massey.



At Lindisfarne Castle in 2023, a sound installation was captioned as carrying "a sombre message, warning of the impact of climate change" (see Figure 46). Again, the Trust's curators appear to be engaging in activism and using propagandist rhetoric.

**Figure 46:** Caption at Lindisfarne Castle.



All these activities fall outside the Trust's core purposes, but are in line with the claim in the mansion report that sites in the Trust's care should become "places of the world where contemporary challenges like climate change are acknowledged and tackled".<sup>163</sup> Yet the endless catastrophising is nothing more than mere rhetoric which distracts attention from looking after countryside in an informed and effective way. A responsible conservation charity wishing to make its land resilient to extreme weather would do so through sound management.

163 Berry, T., 2020. *National Trust: Towards a 10-Year Vision for Places & Experiences*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a3e3bb411b976850808785/t/6515626035b94f1fe996da72/1695900260653/A+10-yr+vision+for+Places+and+Experiences+%28v2.1%29.pdf>> p.14

## 2. Follow the money



The findings in the first chapter give rise to the same question: what is driving the National Trust to abandon its core mission of heritage conservation and to pursue controversial projects that alienate its members and volunteers? Part of the answer lies in the financial incentives that the Trust's management has apparently been chasing, often at the expense of its statutory and charitable obligations. This section examines the ways in which the Trust's rhetoric, agenda and actions have been influenced by external sources of funding, such as research grants, government subsidies and corporate sponsors, as well as by its own commercial interests, such as rents, revenues and cost-cutting. Prioritisation of these financial concerns, suggests money is seen as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, has led to the erosion of the charity's standards and reputation.

### a) Capitalising on research partnerships and subsidies

The National Trust has been heavily reliant on external funding from research grants, government subsidies and corporate sponsors, which have influenced its research priorities and project choices. Chapter 1 of this report has shown that much of the Trust's deviation from its core duties has been the result of a seeming obsession with climate change and, separately, DEI. This aligns with the Trust's identification of the two top "strategic research areas" as being "Climate action" and "Everyone welcome", which is about "how we help people to connect with nature and culture, increase the number and diversity of our visitors, and address unequal access to nature, beauty and history".<sup>164</sup> The latter research area appears to overlap with another, "Curation and experiences", which focusses on "uncover[ing] hidden histories".<sup>165</sup> Many of the most controversial projects undertaken by the Trust would fall under one of these research areas. But why would these be considered by the Trust, primarily a heritage conservation charity, as particular priorities?

Perhaps one influence can be found in the National Trust Annual Research Reports, which reveal that between 2022 and 2024 the organisation received £2.98 million<sup>166</sup> in research income from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and £1.8 million<sup>167</sup> from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), meaning these two research funding bodies cumulatively accounted

<sup>164</sup> National Trust. *Strategic framework for research*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/strategic-framework-for-research>> [Accessed on 14 July 2024].

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> 1,451,776 + 1,529,664 = 2,981,664

<sup>167</sup> 809,121 + 987,867 = 1,796,988



for just over 98%<sup>168</sup> of the Trust's external research funding in that period.<sup>169</sup> A major focus of NERC is "Pursuing strategic programmes that address the critical environmental challenges of climate change".<sup>170</sup> AHRC, meanwhile, "invests in a rich, diverse and creative research and innovation system through the contributions that arts and humanities ideas and people make", with particular emphases on "Taking global perspectives and equitable approaches" and on "Positive action on equality, diversity and inclusion in our funded portfolio".<sup>171</sup> It is therefore clear why the National Trust would, from a purely financial viewpoint, see climate change and uncovering "hidden histories" as strategic priorities. Both NERC and AHRC are branches of the taxpayer-funded United Kingdom Research and innovation (UKRI), which "invest[s] £8 billion of taxpayers' money each year into research and innovation and the people who make it happen".<sup>172</sup> While not all of the Trust's research projects funded by these bodies fall outside its core remit, there are many examples where the National Trust is using taxpayer money to produce pieces of research that are not ultimately about heritage preservation:

*During the Changing Landscape Values network, bringing together environmental humanities, social geographers, historians, archaeologists, land managers and curators to explore society's changing relationship with land and nature at Killerton, Kingston Lacy, and Sherbourne [sic.] Emerging projects will see teams working with local communities and young adults as agents of change to create new interventions that extend our understanding of diverse nature-connectedness behaviours.*

*The Colonial Connections Community of Practice [which has] continued to grow, extending membership beyond the original four properties (Penrhyn, Snowhill, Trengwainton, and Tyntesfield). Established in 2019, the Community of Practice has launched a new way of working across the university and heritage sectors, creating multi-disciplinary teams to research colonial histories at our places.*

*Cornish Gardens of the National Trust and Global Plant Collecting enabled the team to commission Small Acts, a live participatory art company, to produce a map of Cornish gardens including connections to colonialism, and to develop and test performance-led interpretation as a means of widening access and engaging visitors in heritage gardens, with the outcomes documented in a short film.*<sup>173</sup>

All three latter case studies have come about as a result of the Trust's partnership with GW4, a consortium comprising the universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter.

The Trust's research partnership with University College London (UCL) has led to projects to "explore a range of anti-racist, decolonial, environmental and climate-related initiatives currently

168 4,778,428 / 4,867,346 = 0.982

169 National Trust Annual Research Report 2022–23. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://nt.iro.bl.uk/concern/reports/b407e6e8-ac0b-4244-b336-13877f2cd0ef?locale=en>> p.2; National Trust Annual Research Report 2023–24. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://nt.iro.bl.uk/concern/reports/367aa022-8131-4d44-a6dc-ebb353d95734?locale=en>> p.2.

170 UKRI. Natural Environment Research Council: Strategic Delivery Plan 2022–2025. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NERC020922-StrategicDeliveryPlan2022.pdf>> p.7.

171 UKRI. Arts and Humanities Research Council: Strategic Delivery Plan 2022–2025. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/AHRC-010922-StrategicDeliveryPlan2022.pdf>> p.7.

172 UKRI. Available online at: <<https://www.ukri.org/>> [Accessed on 10 July 2024].

173 National Trust Annual Research Report 2023–24. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://nt.iro.bl.uk/concern/reports/367aa022-8131-4d44-a6dc-ebb353d95734?locale=en>> p.13.

taking place in the heritage sector".<sup>174</sup> Partnering with the University of Oxford, the National Trust has secured funding for "a collaborative PhD on *Theatrical communities and Collaboration*", with a particular focus on Smallhythe Place, which it anticipates might focus, among a range of options, on "Alternative family structures: cross-generational and lesbian communities" or "Curating a women's museum: curation by a woman for a woman".<sup>175</sup>

It is important to note that the estimated value of the National Trust's collaborative research projects is much higher than the publicly available figures of direct inward flows from external research funding sources. For example, between 2021 and 2023, the University of Exeter partnership resulted in ten collaborative research projects which brought in £20.8 million in research funding.<sup>176</sup> From 2021 to 2023, the Trust collaborated with Newcastle University "on over £8 million of projects, driving forward innovation, shaping vibrant places and generating significant social, cultural, economic and environmental value".<sup>177</sup> These are just two examples; there are many more.

Given the sheer size of the grants, it would not be surprising if the Trust tailors some research priorities to align with those of its potential funders; this has given rise to Trust involvement in projects that have little or nothing to do with heritage preservation but rather with advancing a politicised agenda.

Of all the Trust's research collaborations, the one with the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) appears to have been most influential in steering the charity onto the wrong course. The RCMG encourages and supports "activist thinking and practice", and the partnership between the two bodies has been led by Museum Studies Professor Richard Sandell, who co-authored *Museum Activism* (2019) – a defence of engagement in social justice initiatives by arts and culture institutions – and whose biography on the social media platform X includes the following: "#TransInclusiveCulture - free to download comprehensive guidance on advancing #trans inclusion available now".<sup>178</sup>

Many of the identity politics-related projects discussed in Chapter One, section c – the controversial "Prejudice and Pride" (LGBTQ-focussed), "Everywhere and Nowhere" (disability-focussed), "Colonial Countryside Project", slavery report and "Women and Power" initiatives – were both run directly by or in collaboration with the University of Leicester, and also fell under the "Everyone Welcome" strategy, which was in itself the brainchild of the RCMG.

Some aspects of the National Trust-RCMG partnership appear to have been fuelled by a desire to foster relations which will bring in funding in the long term. For example, the National Trust partnered with RCMG on a 2022 project called "Permissible Beauty": a "portrait project plac[ing]

174 UCL, 2023. *UCL and the National Trust: Looking after our history and heritage together*. 6 September. Available online at: <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/enterprise/case-studies/2023/sep/ucl-and-national-trust-looking-after-our-history-and-heritage-together>> [1 August 2024].

175 *National Trust Annual Research Report 2023–24*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://nt.iro.bl.uk/concern/reports/367aa022-8131-4d44-a6dc-ebb353d95734?locale=en>> p.11; TORCH, 2024. *Open-Oxford-Cambridge AHRC DTP-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award at Oxford University, in partnership with the National Trust*. 5 January. Available online at: <<https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/open-oxford-cambridge-ahrc-dtp-funded-collaborative-doctoral-award-at-oxford-university-in-par>> [7 July 2024].

176 *National Trust Annual Research Report 2022–23*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://nt.iro.bl.uk/concern/reports/b407e6e8-ac0b-4244-b336-13877f2cd0ef?locale=en>> p.6.

177 *Ibid.*, p.7.

178 Sandell, R. [X account] Available online at: <<https://x.com/RSMuseumStudies>> [4 September 2024].

Black Queer lives at the centre of a highly creative, collaborative and participatory process" which "explores new approaches to engaging both existing and new audiences – creating experiences that are affirming, welcoming and relevant for groups that are often underrepresented in heritage visiting".<sup>179</sup>

While it is not clear that the Trust benefitted financially from its role as a partner in this project, it may have helped it strengthen the necessary credentials to have this effect in the long-term; at the start of 2024, The Queer Heritage and Collections Network, of which the National Trust (alongside English Heritage, Historic England, Historic Royal Palaces and Leicester's RCMG) is a founding member, was awarded £130,574 via the University of Leicester – through an Arts Council National Lottery Project Grant – to develop "public programming bringing LGBTIQ+ histories and themes to the fore".<sup>180</sup>

Even the change in attitude towards volunteers, and therefore the subsequent decline in volunteer numbers (see section c, part two of this chapter), appears to be attributable in part to Leicester University involvement. A 2021 "Impact case study" produced by the University of Leicester states that:

*"A qualitative study, commissioned by the National Trust, was conducted at two National Trust properties to better understand the complexities of managing volunteers. Using an arts-based research design to explore the interpersonal interactions between managers and unpaid staff, they found that, in practice, the management of volunteers is significantly different to the management of paid staff. In particular, researchers identified the unique emotional challenges posed by managing 'affectively committed' volunteers; that is, volunteers motivated by a deep emotional attachment to the place, people, or organisation they are tasked with helping. At times, volunteers were resistant to change, non-compliant, more likely to publically [sic] criticize managers or organisational policy, and less concerned about regulating their own emotions."*<sup>181</sup>

It was this research which led to "a series of interventions" to change the way in which volunteers in the Trust were managed, with an ESRC Impact Accelerator Fund of £12,000 helping support two Leicester academics – Anne-Marie Greene and Jenna Ward – to undertake, among other things, "The facilitation of and participation in a workshop with National Trust stakeholders to investigate the redevelopment of existing training materials in line with research findings."<sup>182</sup> The research "led directly to their [the Trust's] new acceptance that managing volunteers is challenging and difficult for their paid staff and has been addressed through changes in their training and guidelines. The training and guidelines were developed in collaboration with the University of Leicester."<sup>183</sup> One of the "pieces of guidance and policy" was "Exploring Everyone Welcome with Volunteers (a practical resource to help plan for and initiate dialogue with volunteers about

179 University of Leicester. *Permissible Beauty*. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/permissible-beauty>> [4 September 2024].

180 University of Leicester, 2024. *Queer Heritage and Collections Network awarded Arts Council England and National Lottery Project Funding*. 1 February. Available online at: <<https://le.ac.uk/news/2024/february/queer-heritage>> [23 July 2024].

181 University of Leicester. *Impact case study (REF3)*. [pdf] Available online at: <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/6750a1c2-6485-4420-9260-17e25fca8954/pdf>> p.1.

182 *Ibid.*, p.2.

183 *Ibid.*

inclusive practicey”<sup>184</sup> It would therefore appear that the University of Leicester had a significant influence on the roll-out of inclusivity, anti-racism and unconscious bias training to volunteers in 2021 as they prepared to resume their roles following the pandemic. As explored in chapter one, this appears to have contributed to a significant fall in volunteer numbers.

It is not only research grants which may have influenced the Trust’s approach and strategy. In relation to rewilding, for instance, which has led to the decline of Trust gardens, the eviction of tenant farmers and the sacking of gardeners, the Trust may have had a financial motivation in the form of grants from both the government and bodies such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund.<sup>185</sup>

The National Trust’s proactive grant hunt has even included applications for funding for projects which yield no tangible outcome. In 2022, the Trust received government grants of £100,000 for each of the following four projects: “Building the investment case for securing private finance to accelerate the delivery of the NT’s carbon and net zero targets, through scaling up and accelerating woodland planting and peatland restoration and other abatement initiatives”; “Developing a National Urban Nature Fund (NUNF) for investment in urban green spaces”;<sup>186</sup> “Build[ing] a new model of a regional park based on the 8 Hills Park through new investment streams [and] Work[ing] with landowners to build attractive investment proposals that can be replicated in other urban areas”; and “Writ[ing] a business case to transition the Natural [sic] Trust’s tenant farmers towards more nature-friendly farming by generating revenue from carbon and Biodiversity Net Gain payments.”<sup>187</sup> None of these grants were for physical environmental work with tangible outcomes, but rather for writing business cases.

Grants have also been used to fund some of the frivolous and irrelevant activity undertaken by the Trust outside the precinct of its own land and estates, such as the Blossom Watch and Castlefield Viaduct programmes highlighted in chapter one. In April 2023, the National Trust revealed that, to date, it had “been awarded over £5.4 million in funds through Postcode Earth Trust, thanks to players of People’s Postcode Lottery.”<sup>188</sup> The same funding source helped provide the Trust with the £1.8 million required for Phase One of the Castlefield Viaduct project.<sup>189</sup> The Trust’s management hopes to “develop bigger, bolder plans for the next phase of the viaduct”, with immediately obvious financial motivation; in July 2023, Duncan Laird, the Trust’s Head of Urban Places, noted that the next phase “won’t happen without big investment however, and we hope BDP [the developer] can help us create a vision for this space to reflect ambitious plans for the city that investors want to be part of.”<sup>190</sup>

In spite of the huge grants received by the Trust management for such projects, it still constantly

| 184 *Ibid.*, p.3.

| 185 National Trust. *Working towards a green recovery*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/nature-climate/climate-change-sustainability/working-towards-green-recovery>> [Accessed on 7 September 2024].

| 186 The unrounded value of this particular grant was £99,750.

| 187 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2022. *50 projects receive up to £100,000 to boost investment in nature*. 31 May. Available online at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/50-projects-receive-up-to-100000-each-to-boost-investment-in-nature>> [Accessed 16 July 2024].

| 188 National Trust, 2023. *National Trust invites public to celebrate fleeting beauty of spring in Blossom Week extravaganza*. 24 April. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/services/media/national-trust-invites-public-to-celebrate-fleeting-beauty-of-spring-in-blossom-week-extravaganza>> [Accessed 16 July 2024].

| 189 National Trust. *Our work at Castlefield Viaduct*. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cheshire-greater-manchester/castlefield-viaduct/our-work-at-castlefield-viaduct>> [Accessed 16 July 2024].

| 190 BDP, 2023. *BDP to design next phase of Castlefield Viaduct sky park*. 24 July. Available online at: <<https://www.bdp.com/en/latest/news/2023/bdp-to-design-next-phase-of-castlefield-viaduct-sky-park/>> [2 July 2024].



encourages members and the public to donate to the schemes too. Figure 47 shows a poster at Speke Hall asking visitors to donate to Blossom Watch and to spread the word.

**Figure 47:** Blossom Watch poster at Speke Hall.



Placing “nature” – vaguely defined but typically not the carefully maintained and presented kind – on a pedestal and reducing the emphasis on the historic houses, or at least shifting attention onto the more negative aspects of the history of these houses, appears to be a deliberate strategy to turn members’ attention to green spaces while de-popularising built heritage. The former are much easier to tend, particularly when labour-saving and cost-cutting initiatives such as rewilding are being legitimised and encouraged; that gardens and estates are falling into disrepair does not matter as much and indeed is less noticeable when a rewilding policy is being pushed. All this would suggest that the strategy outlined in the Trust’s 10-Year Vision (see chapter one) has a commercial underpinning.

When members complain about why the Trust has been spending money on campaigns and projects of questionable relevance to its core remit while letting its houses fall into disrepair, the Trust responds that the money being used has been restricted to be spent on certain projects. This may be true, but Trust managers and curators are actively applying for grants to undertake the work, and could instead have applied for grants to undertake vital conservation work. It would appear, therefore, that the Trust is choosing to divert time and energy from real conservation activities towards comparatively easy-to-undertake but often controversial initiatives of at best tangential relevance.

## **b) Social justice warriors or businessmen?**

The Trust’s management and its defenders are adamant that its activities are based on genuine concern for and commitment to climate and the environment, and to social justice issues more generally. Yet close interrogation of the Trust’s actions reveals a pattern of hypocrisy and double standards, indeed, when the Trust may benefit financially by taking action that goes against its supposed commitments, it often appears to have no qualms about doing so. For instance, the Trust boasts about planting millions of trees and of its concern about felling of trees. In 2024 the top floor of Polesden Lacey in Surrey was dedicated to an exhibition inviting the visitor to “imagine a world without trees”, yet trees – including mature beech, oak and red cedar – have been felled in

large numbers, without proper explanation, on the Polesden Estate itself.<sup>191</sup> In recent years locals have been dismayed to find felling operations under way across the wild and idyllic woodland, previously a rich habitat teeming with birds, mammals and butterflies. The felling has borne the hallmarks of commercial forestry operations (see Figure 48).

**Figure 48:** Tree felling on the Polesden Estate in Surrey in 2021.



The Trust's tree-related activism is also undermined by the Trust's own razing of forests in their care to make way for new car parks, which have been relocated to enable financially strategic entrance layouts at Trust sites. New, large visitor centres have been built in the location of the original car parks, immediately next to the house and forming a new entrance through which visitors must pass, nudging them towards the commercial elements of the property: the café and shops. In many cases, the car park relocations also mean the expansion of the car parks which, while commercially lucrative for the Trust due to high prices, runs against the Trust's seeming

<sup>191</sup> National Trust, 2024. *The Last Tree & The Art of Nature in Collaboration with Luke Adam Hawker*. 27 March. Available online at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/surrey/polesden-lacey/the-last-tree-the-art-of-nature-in-collaboration-with-luke-adam-hawker>> [Accessed 15 September 2024].

obsession with reducing emissions.

One example is Winkworth Arboretum; given that it is the National Trust's only dedicated arboretum, the Trust management's decision to deforest swathes of woodland to create a new car park and to build a large visitor centre adjacent to it is revealing. A Trust poster describing the project as "a new retail offer" appears to betray the commercial motivations behind the scheme; the car park appears to be placed to maximise revenues from the new visitor centre.

**Figure 49:** *The proposed visitor centre to be built at Winkworth Arboretum.*



Another example is Trelissick in Cornwall, where in 2022 Trust officials applied for planning permission to cut down an orchard and woodland to build a new, additional, car park with over 200 spaces.<sup>192</sup> Locals expressed particular shock at the proposed destruction of an ancient orchard, and the plan was rejected by councillors in 2024, forcing the Trust to abandon the plans

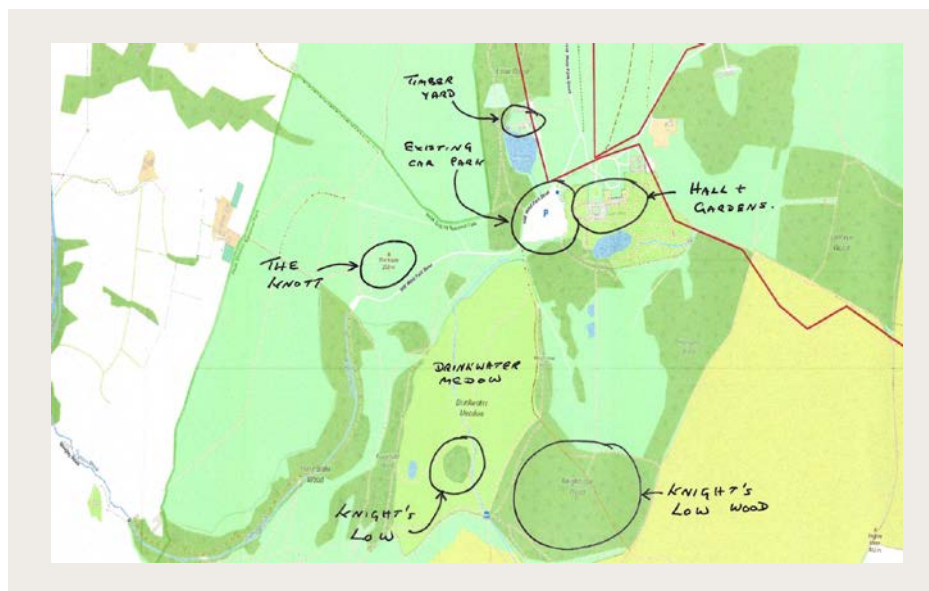
<sup>192</sup> Trehwela, L., 2022. "Concerns over National Trust plans to build a new 250-space car park at Cornwall's Trelissick estate and gardens". *CornwallLive*, 29 December. Available online at: <<https://www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/concerns-over-national-trust-plans-7972956>> [10 September 2024].



at least in the short term.<sup>193</sup> The Gardens Trust, one of the expert bodies consulted by the planning committee about the plans, commented in February 2023 that “We appreciate that planting mitigation is proposed, but this takes time to mature. [...] As custodians of our national heritage, in our opinion, the NT has a responsibility to work towards a solution which preserves the unique significance and setting of Trelissick as opposed to the prioritization of ever greater visitor numbers.”<sup>194</sup> Refusing the application, Cornwall Council explained that:

*“The proposed development, by virtue of its scale and form into undeveloped countryside and the specific design of the crossing results in a discordant element and visual intrusion resulting in unacceptable harm to the Cornish National Landscape to which great weight must be given and the setting of the registered garden of Trelissick.”<sup>195</sup>*

**Figure 50:** A map showing the National Trust’s plans to relocate the car park at Lyme Park.



In January 2024, pressure from locals and members of the public similarly forced the management at Lyme to reverse a major plan to relocate the car park to Knight's Low Wood (see Figure 50); a petition arguing that the plan, if executed, would lead to a “major net loss of green space, even more traffic on local roads, even more cars traveling even further through the park” amassed over 1,500 signatures.<sup>196</sup>

These are not isolated examples; for example, the Trust is introducing or seeking to introduce similar schemes – with larger car parks and new visitor centres – at Kingston Lacy in Dorset, the Belton Estate in Lincolnshire, Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire and Morston Quay in Norfolk.

<sup>193</sup> In spite of the fact that the plan received over 120 public objections compared to only three comments in support, the Trust has decided to appeal the decision, showing a prioritisation of commercial interests above the interests of locals, the public and the environment.

<sup>194</sup> The Gardens Trust, 2023. Application comment. *Cornwall Council*, 2 March. Available online at: <<https://planning.cornwall.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=consulteeComments&keyVal=RLDOZ2FGGR000&consulteeCommentsPage=2>> [Accessed on 30 September 2024].

<sup>195</sup> Cornwall Council, 2024. *Refusal Notice*. [pdf] Available online at: <[https://planning.cornwall.gov.uk/online-applications/files/0E8103542F909F869C543B2B3D70E63D/pdf/PA22\\_10184-R1FULZ\\_-\\_REFUSAL\\_NOTICE-7978913.pdf](https://planning.cornwall.gov.uk/online-applications/files/0E8103542F909F869C543B2B3D70E63D/pdf/PA22_10184-R1FULZ_-_REFUSAL_NOTICE-7978913.pdf)> [Accessed on 30 September 2024].

<sup>196</sup> Slater, C., 2024. “Pride and Prejudice beauty spot U-turn amid controversial car park expansion plans”. *Manchester Evening News*, 30 January. Available online at: <<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/pride-prejudice-beauty-spot-u-28539004>> [Accessed 28 September 2024].



While the latter case does not appear to involve plans for an expansion of the car park, the Trust lists under the planned “Car park improvements” the relocation of the parking ticket machine to the new visitor welcome building, again evidencing a general desire to create rat-runs which force visitors through the commercialised quarters of their sites. Local opposition to the Morston Quay plans has included objections on the grounds that “The local businesses attract the public and the local area provides the amenity that they seek, not the National Trust. There has been no consultation with local people, and no effort made by the Trust to communicate these plans”.<sup>197</sup>

Further evidence that the Trust is more interested in commercial ventures than in the environment is its readiness to auction off its “green spaces”, such as when it tried to sell Bonds Meadow and Clayton Meadow to private developers (see section a, part two of chapter one), ironically doing so even as it argues that creating green spaces on land it does not own lies within its remit.

Another example of environment-related hypocrisy involves the Trust’s own environmental irresponsibility and negligence of the green spaces in its care. Overflowing dog waste bins are a regular occurrence at many open spaces, including The Devil’s Punchbowl at Hindhead, Surrey (see Figure 51).<sup>198</sup>

**Figure 51:** Overflowing bins at the Devil’s Punchbowl in Hindhead, Surrey.



At many sites, the Trust has also replaced its crockery and cutlery with single-use items, which has not only reduced the customer experience but has also created more waste: a policy detrimental to the environment. The reason for this change, initially ostensibly a Covid-19 pandemic measure to avoid transmission, appears to be simply that it is cheaper for the Trust than hiring the necessary staff to wash up crockery and cutlery. All these changes indicate at least some readiness to be environmentally unfriendly provided there is a commercial benefit.<sup>199</sup>

197 Warren, J., 2024. “Morston Quay National Trust plans met with objections”. *North Norfolk News*, 9 August. Available online at: <<https://www.northnorfolknews.co.uk/news/24508127.morston-quay-national-trust-plans-met-objections/>> [Accessed 30 November 2024].

198 The Trust management’s partnership with the group Muslim Hikers to bring more visitors to this site – which it has encouraged by, for instance, erecting signs pointing towards Mecca and installing outdoor prayer mats – has led to an influx of visitors in such large numbers that the environmental integrity and sustainability of Dovedale is threatened.

199 Although the Trust claims that the throwaway items it has introduced are recyclable, the implication that because of this their use is environmentally friendly is untrue when the alternative is using items that can simply be washed and re-used indefinitely.

Another example is the way in which the Trust has been acting against its purported aim of increasing accessibility and inclusivity. Even as it justifies the pursuit of well-funded DEI projects (see section c, part two of the first chapter) by arguing that this will help it fulfil Octavia Hill's vision of a Trust that is "for everyone", the Trust has heightened, rather than reduced, one of the only tangible barriers to entry for would-be visitors and members by raising its membership prices, which have been increasing steadily.<sup>200</sup> Between 2021 and 2025, the price of membership has increased by a third, from £72 for an individual adult and £126 for a family to £96 and £169, respectively: a percentage increase significantly above inflation.<sup>201</sup> At the same time, the Trust has been reducing some of the benefits and services that members receive, such as limiting opening hours and access to many of its properties, in many cases introducing a pre-booking system that limits the availability of tickets and prevents the spontaneous drop-in visits which members used to enjoy. Many entry prices to Trust properties – as well as parking prices – have also increased significantly. The "new audiences" to whom the Trust is supposedly reaching out by, for instance, pushing a decolonisation narrative or putting on youth-friendly exhibitions, would doubtless be more inclined – and better able – to visit Trust sites were the membership and entry prices lower.

One of the most controversial aspects of the Trust's commercialisation has been its exploitation of tenants by raising rents and, imposing unreasonable conditions. One expert has noted that the recent expulsions of tenant farmers (see section a, part two of chapter one), often ignores the concerns and objections of local communities:

*"feels like it is financially driven, with the trust targeting big grants for landscape-scale nature recovery at the expense of its tenanted farms. It sees this as a way of creating significant income for itself. However, it does not understand the implications for the farming businesses and family homes that it is effectively destroying. The way it is doing this suggests that it has complete contempt for the farmers who have farmed the land for generations."*<sup>202</sup>

The Trust has also increased its rents for other types of tenants, such as those living in cottages, flats or houses on Trust land, sometimes forcing them to leave. It has also been accused of being insensitive and inflexible towards its tenants during the Covid-19 pandemic, refusing to offer rent relief or payment plans to those who have been affected by the lockdowns and the economic downturn. Rent hikes are justified as being based on market rates, whereas it might be expected that – in line with its charitable status and ethos – the Trust should not seek to profit from its tenants. The exploitation of tenants goes against the long tradition in the charity of trying to ensure that locals could afford to live in Trust houses and often also against the memoranda of wishes of those who bequeathed estates to the Trust, many of whom had stipulated that only low rents be charged.

The increasingly mean-spirited treatment of volunteers is also testament to a commercialised approach by the current management. At Lyme, in Cheshire, a change in management at the

<sup>200</sup> Membership fees are one of the main sources of income for the Trust; in 2023 they amounted to £276.5 million and accounted for 38% of the Trust's total income.

<sup>201</sup> AgeUK, 2021. *Why should you join the National Trust?* 20 July. Available online at: <<https://www.ageukmobility.co.uk/mobility-news/article/why-should-you-join-the-national-trust>> [Accessed 7 December 2024]; National Trust, 2025. *Membership*. Available at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/membership>> [Accessed 6 March 2025].

<sup>202</sup> Curtis, M., 2022. "National Trust rewilding projects leaves tenants feeling pushed out". *Farmers Weekly*, 27 July. Available online at: <<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/business-management/tenancies-rents/national-trust-rewilding-projects-leaves-tenants-feel-pushed-out>>

property in 2018 led to:

*“a noticeable difference in the relationship between Trust management and volunteers. It became much more an ‘us and them’ situation. This general manager kept herself to herself behind closed doors and never bothered to walk round the house and speak to volunteers as her predecessors had done.”<sup>203</sup>*

Retired diplomat Nicholas Bostin, who resigned as a volunteer at Lyme in 2022 after 14 years of service, wrote of how erstwhile traditions such as being “given sandwiches and cake on Bank Holidays in recognition of volunteering”, being “given biscuits in the house every day” and throwing “a garden party for volunteers each July, providing a barbecue or hog roast with wine and beer and desserts” ceased without any real explanation. “We didn’t attend Lyme just to be given food and drink, but in my mind this was a recognition of the time and effort given to the Trust by volunteers. This is another example of the Trust’s shabby treatment of volunteers.” Following a meeting at which he was criticised for being “over-critical of management at the property” and being forced to agree to intrusive measures to prevent him from making further such criticism without the house and collections manager’s knowledge, Bostin resigned as a volunteer.<sup>204</sup>

Another example of poor treatment of volunteers is Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire, a long-serving volunteer of which wrote that:

*“When I started seven years ago, the volunteers were shown appreciation by the staff at the property. A summer barbecue used to be arranged for us with free food, and a Christmas meal was arranged and also paid for. Both of these have ceased. Of more concern is the obvious reluctance to pay volunteer expenses in a timely manner. I claim my expenses approximately every six weeks and they are always £100 plus. When I started as a volunteer they used to be approved within a couple of days. Over the last twelve months it has averaged three weeks for them to be approved and on two occasions it was more than four weeks. This from one of the wealthiest charities in the country. I struggle to understand how this sits with the NT mantra of “we value our volunteers.”<sup>205</sup>*

The shortage of volunteers resulting from the deteriorating standards of care by the Trust’s management has led to Shugborough constantly being in a state of partial closure, with the entire first floor often inaccessible to the public. These cases are reflective of wider disillusionment among volunteers about the Trust management, and the consequent closure – mostly partial – of properties is likewise a national phenomenon.

Furthermore, the commercial incentives have created a vicious circle whereby knowingly or otherwise the Trust has removed staff members likely to be critical of the Trust’s new strategy likely encouraging a new generation of Trust staff who are active in social justice wars while being ignorant about conservation and the history of art, architecture, gardens and landscape.

<sup>203</sup> Bostin, N., 2022. “My experience as a volunteer at Lyme Park”. *Restore Trust*, 29 July. Available online at: <<https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/comment/my-experience-as-a-volunteer-at-lyme-park>> [Accessed 30 November 2023].

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> Plimmer, N., 2022. “Volunteers no longer valued by the National Trust”. *Restore Trust*, 27 October. Available online at: <<https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/letters-to-the-editor/volunteers-no-longer-valued>> [Accessed 28 November 2023].

Evidence that the Trust has been replacing traditionally-minded staff members with ones who will help further its commercial interests appears in an article by Andrew Loukes, House and Collections Manager at Petworth House from 2009 until 2021, when he was made redundant by Trust management.<sup>206</sup> Loukes has written that Covid provided the Trust with “an opportunity to remove staff whose faces were perceived as a problematic fit by the new curatorial regime”.<sup>207</sup> The “principal reason given” for his own being made redundant was that he “did not have the capability to attract ‘new and different audiences’”.<sup>208</sup>

This trend is also mirrored in relation to infantilisation, which has been pursued to bring in “new audiences”, including young people, as exemplified by Sudbury Hall. However, the replacement of long-serving scholarly experts with younger and less advanced staff has led to dumbing down, including through a decline in spelling and grammar.<sup>209</sup> Rewilding, meanwhile, appears to have been undertaken both because it is cheaper to get rid of the gardeners and because it is a good grant generator, but the loss of gardeners has also led to the decline of gardens even when rewilding has not been pursued at a site.

This chapter has shown that the National Trust’s departure from its statutory aims and charitable ethos appears to have been partly financially motivated, as evidenced by its pursuit of external funding, its own commercial interests, and its neglect of heritage conservation. This has helped the the charity become a vehicle for political activism. In doing so, the Trust has betrayed its founders, its supporters and its beneficiaries.

206 Loukes, A., 2021. “Problematic faces?” *Restore Trust*, 28 April. Available online at: <<https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/restore-trust-is-sues/problematic-faces>> [Accessed on 5 March 2024].

207 *Ibid.*

208 *Ibid.*

209 Examples include the misspelling of Trust site “Barnmouth” as “Barmouth” on a billboard advertising the charity’s “Space to Feel” campaign; writing “Ring Ousel” instead of “Ring Ouzel” when mentioning the ground nesting bird, with the mistake repeated even after a birder corrected the wrong spelling on the initial poster; “Exercise your way towards spring” on the cover of a Trust leaflet; “Look out for Anns [missing an apostrophe] room on your right” on a poster at Snowhill Manor; and “permenant contract” on a poster at Sizergh advertising a Head Gardener position.



### 3. Power without accountability



In order to identify and recommend solutions, we should look first at the root causes of some of the problems. The Trust has been able to escape scrutiny by appearing to undermine channels of accountability and by making the decision-making process less accessible as possible. This has enabled it to abandon traditional conservation activities.

#### a) Democratic backsliding

Members have long been the most vocal critics of the Trust, which is understandable given that – unlike staff, volunteers and tenants – they face no repercussions for speaking out. Until recently, the biggest mechanism through which members could express their dissatisfaction was by participating in the Annual General Meetings (AGMs), during which they could cast votes to elect Council members and on members' resolutions. In recent years, particularly with the emergence and growth of the management-critical members' group Restore Trust, the Trust's management has felt sufficiently threatened by functioning membership democracy that it introduced a new voting system – Quick Vote – which effectively prevents any Council candidates or members' resolutions from succeeding unless they have the backing of the current leadership. Introduced in 2022 without any prior membership consultation or advance warning to members, Quick Vote is the foremost option on the ballot form, nudging unsuspecting members towards approving the Trust leadership's voting recommendations "in full", without considering the merits of each candidate or resolution. The introduction of Quick Vote has skewed the results of every AGM since, as has been explained in the 2024 Legatum Institute report *National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust*.<sup>210</sup> Never before has it been the case that only leadership-recommended Council members and resolutions have succeeded.

As Sir William Proby, former Chairman of the Trust, has written in an article endorsing the *National Distrust* report, the governance review undertaken by Lord Blakenham in 2003 established "powers of appointment to the board by the Council", and "Given these important powers, it was vital that elections to the council by the Trust's members should be as democratic as possible":

*It was recommended by Blakenham's review that the practice of using the chairman's proxy vote for elections should be abolished. The chairman's proxy for members' resolutions was retained on the basis that chairmen would have the ability to listen to the debate at the AGM before casting their vote.*

*It was quite normal for members critical of the Trust's policy to be elected to the council. It took two*

| 210 Gebreyohanes, Z., 2024. "National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust". *Legatum Institute*.

years to introduce the reforms and, during my time, there were at least seven members of the council who were very critical. I welcomed their presence as it allowed a frank debate where all views could be aired, a vote could be taken and the organisation could move on.

The Legatum report shows that, in more recent years, there has been a steady erosion of the safeguards that Blakenham introduced. In particular, the introduction of the “quick vote” – an extreme form of proxy voting – goes against the whole spirit of the Blakenham review by making the election process undemocratic. [...]

In the past two years since the Quick Vote was introduced, all the candidates who have been elected to the Council have been approved by a nominations committee appointed by the Council itself. All the others were defeated by the “quick vote”. This is not credible, especially when one of the candidates was of the calibre of Lord Sumption. It is tantamount to the board of trustees appointing the people responsible for appointing them.<sup>211</sup>

A similar means through which the Trust has undermined the ability of members to express their views is by preventing members from attending the AGMs. Changes made to the Trust's governing Statutory Instrument scheme by the Trustees in 2022 which purported to increase membership involvement – by allowing members to participate online – have been used in a perverse manner: reducing membership involvement by not allowing most members to participate in any way, except for online.

As explained in *National Distrust*:

Hundreds of members were excluded from attending the Annual General Meeting (AGM) in person in both 2022 and 2023. The Trust's leadership assert that this was because more members than expected had registered to attend. However, several decades ago attendance was in the thousands, peaking at 2,500 in 1998. Given that the venues booked in 2022 and 2023 had a maximum seating capacity of just 317 and 590<sup>212</sup> respectively, this would suggest that the mismatch of supply and demand for AGM seats arose not from unexpectedly high interest, but from the deliberate booking of venues that were too small. This would indicate a desire to stifle dissent.

The Trust's leadership has claimed it is using a system of random seat allocation. However, in 2023, 140 seats were reserved for attendees of its choosing. If the 2022 figure was similar, this represents just under half of available seats that year. When questioned about how many seats were set aside by the Trust's leadership in 2022, Jan Lasik, the Trust's General Counsel and Secretary, wrote that “we will not be engaging in further correspondence on the question of seat allocations at our AGMs”, while Jo Cooke, Head of Governance, wrote that “we do not see the merit in spending further time in researching responses for last year's event”.<sup>213</sup>

Leaked internal Trust papers seen by the author since the publication of *National Distrust* show that there are further anti-democratic changes on their way. The Trust intends for the 2025 AGM

211 Proby, W., 2024. “The National Trust must return to democracy”. *Telegraph*, 21 March. Available online at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/03/21/national-trust-must-return-to-democracy/>> [Accessed 21 March 2024].

212 The 2023–2024 Annual Report reveals (p.4) that only 292 members attended in person, revealing the illegitimacy of having rejected such large numbers of would-be attendees prior to the event.

213 Gebreyohanes, Z., 2024. “National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust”. *Legatum Institute*, pp.5–6.

to be the last in-person AGM: “the Trust will move to a fully online AGM from 2026”. The foremost justification provided is that there has been “lower membership attendance in person and increasing online engagement”. This is a disingenuous argument for the Trust’s management to make: the reason in-person attendance has fallen is because the Trust has, from 2022, prevented members from attending in person.

Relatedly, the Trust’s management has quietly stopped sending out physical AGM papers to members unless they specifically request them. All these changes appear incongruous with the Trust’s stated drive for greater “inclusivity” and “accessibility”: Age UK, which launched a campaign in 2021 called “Offline and Overlooked”, has conducted analysis which reveals that almost half of over-65s lack basic internet usage skills.<sup>214</sup> It would seem that the Trust has shut out many of the older, less technologically-aware members, likely to overlap with the more traditional cohort of members who oppose the direction of management.

Paula Weideger’s critical 1994 book *Gilding the Acorn: Behind the façade of the National Trust* posed the question “Is the Annual General Meeting a democratic form or a public relations smoke screen?” This question is more pertinent now than ever before.

## **b) A front of respectability**

The National Trust has also resorted to other tactics to create a semblance of trustworthiness and credibility, and to deflect or divert attention from its problems or scandals. One of the ways it has achieved this is by using its media – including social media – connections. The Trust’s management has relied on a roster of journalists, celebrities and influencers who echo or endorse its lines, while appearing independent from the Trust; these figures have played a useful role in presenting the Trust in a virtuous light while mocking or ridiculing its critics, often mischaracterising or caricaturing their views or motives. Examples of influential mouthpieces for the Trust have included Tony Blair’s former spokesman and director of communications Alastair Campbell; *Observer* comedian Stewart Lee (who has written three articles largely making fun of Restore Trust); Emily Thornberry; Carol Vorderman, who was sacked from the BBC in November 2023 for failing to stick to the corporation’s impartiality guidelines; and Sangita Myska, who was let go from LBC in early 2024.

Some less well-known outlets and journalists have played a crucial role in generating pro-Trust management stories and casting aspersions on critics, chief among these being *Byline Times* and *Yorkshire Bylines*. Just after the 2023 AGM, for instance, *Yorkshire Bylines* published an article entitled “National Trust election results: we did it!” in celebration at the success of Quick Vote in making sure the results were in line with the Trust leadership’s recommendation.<sup>215</sup> The article ends with an almost Stalinist instruction: “Stand firm. Together we can hold the line and maintain the truly inclusive and progressive spirit of our Great Britain.”<sup>216</sup> This is not independent

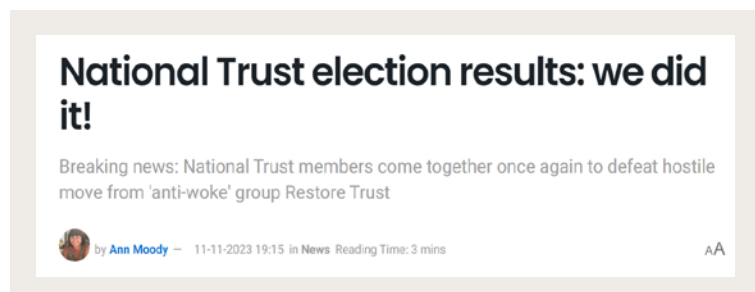
214 Age UK, 2023. *Age UK analysis reveals that almost 6 million people (5,800,000) aged 65+ are either unable to use the internet safely and successfully or aren’t online at all*. 18 September. Available online at: <<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2023/age-uk-analysis-reveals-that-almost-6-million-people-5800000-aged-65-are-either-unable-to-use-the-internet-safely-and-successfully-or-arent-online-at-all/>> [Accessed on 20 March 2024].

215 Moody, A., 2023. “Interview with National Trust’s Celia Richardson”. *Yorkshire Bylines*, 17 November. Available online at: <<https://yorkshirebylines.co.uk/news/national-trust-election-results-we-did-it/>> [Accessed 12 December 2024].

216 *Ibid.*

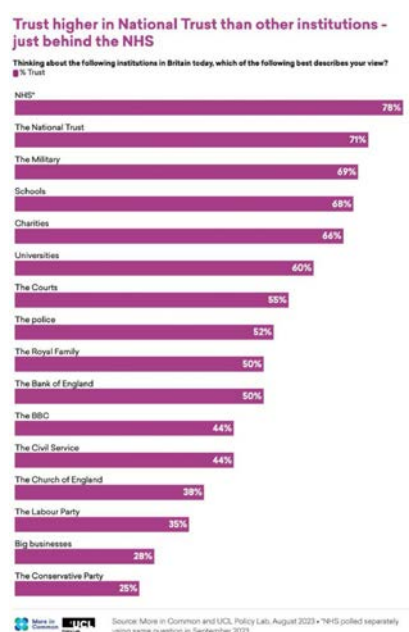
journalism, but rather uncritical coverage. This also suggests that the purpose of Quick Vote is indeed progressive capture.

**Figure 54:** A Yorkshire Bylines headline following the 2023 AGM.<sup>217</sup>



In 2023, a poll by More in Common and the UCL Policy Lab was released appearing to show the National Trust as the second most trusted institution in Britain, after the NHS (see Figure 55). This poll, described as having been “independently commissioned”, was covered prominently in the media and promoted widely by the National Trust itself – including being shared on the personal LinkedIn account of Chairman René Olivieri.<sup>218</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that the poll may not have been as independent as claimed.

**Figure 55:** The poll by More in Common and the UCL Policy Lab.



One indicator of this is that, in the poll bar chart, the National Trust is listed separately from the other charities, which are lumped together under a general “Charities” heading. It is difficult to explain its singling out: it did not, for example, appear in the UK Charity Rankings “top ranked”

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Olivieri, R., 2023. [LinkedIn post]. Available online at: <[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/rene-olivieri-307a91a0\\_national-trust-is-building-its-reputation-activity-7116720526219173888-s0fz/?trk=public\\_profile\\_like\\_view](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/rene-olivieri-307a91a0_national-trust-is-building-its-reputation-activity-7116720526219173888-s0fz/?trk=public_profile_like_view)> [Accessed 1 December 2024].

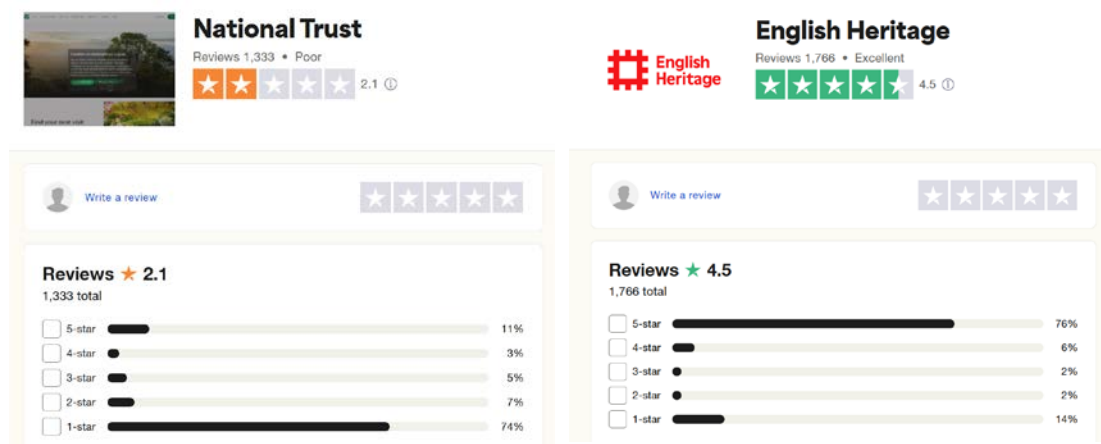


list in the year of the poll.<sup>219</sup> Moreover, Luke Tryl, the UK Director of More in Common, first posted about the survey in reply (via a quote tweet) to Celia Richardson.<sup>220</sup> UCL's research labs have also been research partners of the National Trust (see section a of chapter two).

The timing of the poll's release was also significant. It took place just before a critical AGM at which there was more at stake than usual given some high-profile anti-management Council candidates – including Lord Sumption – as well as a resolution on the abolition of the Quick Vote, on which the Trust's recent AGM successes have relied. The Trust therefore tried to use the poll, which was subsequently widely and uncritically reported in the media, to rebuff criticism and to bolster its credibility at a strategically important time.

In reality, the Trust's popularity is in question, with clear widespread dissatisfaction. The National Trust's Trustpilot rating is 2.1 ("Poor"), with 74% of visitors giving the Trust just one star out of five (see Figure 56).<sup>221</sup> As a point of comparison, English Heritage's rating is 4.5 ("Excellent"), which reflects the 76% who have given it five stars.<sup>222</sup>

**Figure 56:** Comparison of the Trustpilot ratings of the National Trust and English Heritage (February 2025).



Members have been leaving the Trust in large numbers. During the pandemic, membership numbers fell from 5.95 million to 5.4 million.<sup>223</sup> However, following a slight bounce back to 5.7 million in 2022/2023, it has now fallen to 5.38 million members: even lower than during the pandemic, which means the decline cannot be attributed to it.<sup>224</sup> Meanwhile, membership retention – defined as “the propoertion [sic] of total memberships that are renewed in a given year”<sup>225</sup> – was identified by the Trustees in the 2021–22 Annual Report as being one of three “going concerns” posing “severe but plausible downside risks to National Trust operations”, with

<sup>219</sup> YouGov, 2023. *UK Charity Rankings 2023*. Available online at: <<https://business.yougov.com/sectors/charity-nonprofit/uk-charity-rankings-2023>> [Accessed 1 December 2024].

<sup>220</sup> Tryl, L., 2024. [X post] 1 January. Available online at: <<https://x.com/LukeTryl/status/1741898934576967915>> [Accessed 2 December 2024].

<sup>221</sup> Trustpilot. *National Trust: Reviews*. Available online at: <<https://uk.trustpilot.com/review/www.nationaltrust.org.uk>> [Accessed 28 February 2025].

<sup>222</sup> Trustpilot. *English Heritage: Reviews*. Available online at: <<https://uk.trustpilot.com/review/english-heritage.org.uk>> [Accessed 28 February 2025].

<sup>223</sup> *National Trust Annual Report 2020–21*. p.6.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*; *National Trust Annual Report 2021–22*. p.9; *National Trust Annual Report 2022–23*. p.9; *National Trust Annual Report 2023–24*. p.14.

<sup>225</sup> *National Trust Annual Report 2020–21*. p.16.

"membership retention and recruitment of new members trending below the levels that the Trust would normally expect".<sup>226</sup> In the 2022–23 Annual Report, membership retention is 83.4%, much lower than not only pre-pandemic figures but also the level during the pandemic.<sup>227</sup> This figure has fallen lower still, to 81.7% in 2023–24.<sup>228</sup>

### c) A veil of secrecy

The Trust has failed to provide details behind, or justification for, some of its controversial projects or policies; even the 'Reset' programme, which involved a radical restructuring and downsizing of the organisation, was undertaken without proper consultation or explanation. There was also very little transparency regarding the mansion report and, for example, about the decision to classify certain properties as "Treasure Houses"; nor is there a publicly available list of the 28 designated Treasure Houses.

Detailed funding information, both in terms of grants received by the Trust and funds used on the various projects, is usually not made public; with initiatives such as the slavery report or Blossom Watch, it is hard for members to examine inflows and outflows of money. This contrasts to the Trust of the past, whose leadership used to include full breakdowns of expenditure so that members could even see how much was, for instance, going to each property, as can be seen from the early annual reports.

In 2023, the National Trust received £1.41 million in funding from "Migration Funder", listed in the Annual Report for that year as one of the "grant-making bodies" thanked by the Trust for their support.<sup>229</sup> In 2024, it received £1.5 million from the same source, making "Migration Funder" the fourth biggest grant provider that year.<sup>230</sup> However, there appears to be no such organisation as "Migration Funder".

The Trust often engages in purely nominal consultation with members, staff, volunteers and locals, often only revealing information after an internal decision has been made and rarely, taking feedback or criticism into account. Examples of this include the change in approach to Clandon House, the introduction of Quick Vote, and the ending of in-person AGMs. In the case of Clandon, the Trust did not undertake a formal consultation of members or locals before changing the restoration plans (see section a, part one of chapter one). The Trust has also refused to make public the insurance settlement and the conditions of the insurance payout; it claims that the insurance settlement does not cover the full costs of restoration, but has been unwilling to explain how and why the insurance payout for a Grade I-listed house would not have covered all of this.

Even when members or the public actively seek to find out more about the Trust's actions or plans, the management tends not to be forthcoming. The sheer number of Freedom of Information (FoI) requests which the National Trust has declined to answer illustrate this problem. One example is a request from 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023 asking whether the Trust has "had any formal or informal

| 226 *National Trust Annual Report 2021–22*, p.65.

| 227 *National Trust Annual Report 2022–23*, p.15.

| 228 *National Trust Annual Report 2023–24*, p.14.

| 229 *Annual Report 2022–23*, pp.74,127.

| 230 *Annual Report 2023–24*, p.24.

whistleblowing cases raised by staff or volunteers over the last three years"; this has gone unanswered in spite of a year having elapsed since the request was submitted and a subsequent reminder being sent.<sup>231</sup>

Another example would be the unanswered Fol request submitted on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022, requesting:

*"information on how many of your 'housing stock' properties (in England) are currently vacant, and those that have been vacant for more than 6 months. Please also provide this as a percentage of your total housing stock. I am aware of several farm properties that are lying empty without tenants and would like to understand how many properties the National Trust owns that could be rented out, are empty and have been empty for an extended period."*<sup>232</sup>

There is therefore an issue of transparency within the Trust, even though it is a legal duty for charity Trustees to be transparent, particularly about the use of funds.

The pandemic also helped the Trust to paper over cracks in the form of organisational failings and mismanagement. The "Our Performance" table in the Trust's annual report, including a range of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and providing members with a way for the Trust's members to compare the Trust's performance to previous years, has slowly been phased out.

The most critical performance indicator which has quietly been dropped following the pandemic is the Conservation Performance Indicator (CPI), which had been "used to measure how well we are putting conservation into practice at our properties": in other words, how well it was carrying out its principal duty.<sup>233</sup> The 2020–21 Annual Report stated that the use of CPI "was paused during 2020/21. This allowed us to focus on reopening properties and to recover from the impact of Covid-19."<sup>234</sup> There was no explanation as to why the pandemic should affect the physical conservation of houses; in fact, the lower footfall might have been expected to increase the CPI score. The following year's Annual Report stated that the use of CPI "remained paused during 2021–22 to enable us to direct resource where it was most urgently required."<sup>235</sup> Finally, however, the 2022–23 Annual Report revealed that the suspension was in fact intended to be indefinite: "In respect of the Conservation Performance Indicator (CPI) process it was considered that change was required. It was clear that it provided elements of value, but the overall balance of time spent following the process versus time spent considering assets and how they are managed felt disproportionate."<sup>236</sup> The quiet abandonment of the CPI as a performance indicator – confirmed in the 2023–24 Annual Report<sup>237</sup> – could suggest that standards of conservation at Trust properties is falling, but that the Trust's management does not want this to come to light through poor performance figures.

231 St John, E., 2023. "Whistleblowing cases over the last three years". *WhatDoTheyKnow*, 19 September. Available online at: <[https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/whistleblowing\\_cases\\_over\\_the\\_la#incoming-2462789](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/whistleblowing_cases_over_the_la#incoming-2462789)> [20 October 2024].

232 Pope, 2022. "Vacant properties". *WhatDoTheyKnow*, 30 June. Available online at: <[https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/vacant\\_properties\\_81#incoming-2072205](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/vacant_properties_81#incoming-2072205)> [20 October 2024].

233 *National Trust Annual Report 2017–18*, p.5.

234 *National Trust Annual Report 2020–21*, p.7.

235 *National Trust Annual Report 2012–22*, p.12.

236 *National Trust Annual Report 2022–23*, p.14.

237 *National Trust Annual Report 2023–24*, p.15.

Year	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Properties which completed CPI review and reported an improved or static CPI score (%)	87 <sup>238</sup>	87 <sup>239</sup>	-- "re-baselined" <sup>240</sup>	84 <sup>241</sup>	86 <sup>242</sup>	-- "paused" <sup>243</sup>	-- "remained paused" <sup>244</sup>	-- "suspended" <sup>245</sup>	-- Replaced with "Conservation Management Review (CMR) in 2023"

In 2016/17, a new KPI was introduced for "overall service standards", measuring "the number of people that rated the service they received at our properties as 'excellent'".<sup>246</sup> In the first year of its introduction, this rating was 67%, but had dropped to 61% by 2017/18, the same year that many of the irrelevant initiatives and activities, such as Prejudice and Pride, were undertaken (see chapter one). In 2020/21, this performance indicator was also "suspended", at the time justified as being "due to the pandemic"; however, the following year's Annual Report omits any reference to the KPI, and the 2022–23 Annual Report, for a year which would have been unaffected by the pandemic, states that the Trust's leadership "took the decision to pause the KPI relating to overall service standards for a further year". Again, this unexplained decision may be the result of falling membership satisfaction with the service provided at properties, a likely outcome of the closure of many properties and the falling standards which can be seen in the case studies throughout the report.<sup>247</sup> This hiatus has enabled the Trust's management subtly to change the KPI while not announcing the change. While the 2023–24 Annual Report claims that the Trust has "resumed measuring customer satisfaction from June 2023", giving a figure of 66% for that year which it boasts is "higher than the pre-pandemic figure", this in fact refers to people who "rate their visit as 'very satisfied'".<sup>248</sup> This renders the result meaningless and not comparable to the figures of previous full years, as "very satisfied" is not synonymous with "excellent", which had previously been required for a response to count towards this figure but which appears to have been dropped as a response option.

#### d) The breakdown of internal accountability and external oversight

As shown in this section, the Trust's management has been able to steer the charity onto a more commercially oriented path by evading scrutiny in a plethora of ways, including by undermining membership democracy, dismissing volunteers, and hiding uncomfortable truths from the media and the public.

| 238 *National Trust Annual Report 2020–21*, p.7.

| 239 *Ibid.*

| 240 *Ibid.*

| 241 *National Trust Annual Report 2019–20*, p.7.

| 242 *Ibid.*

| 243 *National Trust Annual Report 2020–21*, p.7.

| 244 *National Trust Annual Report 2012–22*, p.12.

| 245 *National Trust Annual Report 2022–23*, p.14.

| 246 *National Trust Annual Report 2018–19*, p.6.

| 247 While the 2023–24 Annual Report (p.7) gives a figure of 66% for that year, it is only "from June 2023" (the report was finalised in August) rendering the result meaningless and not comparable to the figures of previous full years. This has not stopped the Trust from claiming that "We resumed measuring customer satisfaction from June 2023. 66% of people rate their visit as 'very satisfied' – the top grade that could be given. This was higher than the pre-pandemic figure."

| 248 *National Trust Annual Report 2023–24*, p.14.



In addition to the dismantling of membership democracy, Sir William Proby has identified as a factor in the breakdown of accountability the demise of the regional committees and the advisory panels consisting of experts on arts, architecture, archaeology, gardens, nature conservation and land use, which had been crucial and highly valued by the curators:

*Unfortunately, the “quick vote” is not the only problem with the governance of the Trust. For many years, it used advisory panels and regional committees to provide advice and oversight to the staff. The members of these committees and panels were all volunteers. Importantly, they were sub-committees of the board, appointed by the board of trustees and the chairman. They were strongly endorsed by Blakenham as part of the checks and balances.*

*In 2015, however, the Trust demoted the status of the panels and regional committees on the basis that they were there to advise the staff and presumably by implication not the chairman and board of trustees.*

*I think this was a mistake. I relied heavily on the advice of the panels and committees, and met regularly with their chairmen. I believe the director-general of the time felt that they slowed down decision-making, but they served to give external oversight and endorsement to what the Trust was doing. A slower decision is better than a wrong decision. Any organisation of the size and importance of the National Trust needs some form of external oversight.<sup>249</sup>*

The breakdown of internal accountability is exacerbated by the fact that the main external body with oversight of the National Trust, the Charity Commission, has thus far declined to carry out a review.

This report, in particular through the case studies in chapters one and two, has shown how the National Trust has not been managing its resources responsibly, by “over-commit[ting] the charity”, taking “inappropriate risks with the charity’s assets or reputation” and not “mak[ing] sure the charity’s assets are only used to support or carry out its purposes”, all of which the Charity Commission identifies as potential failures under charity law.<sup>250</sup>

The Trust’s leadership has also apparently failed to ensure that the charity is accountable, as required under charity law, both in terms of “ensur[ing] appropriate accountability to members” and “ensur[ing] accountability within the charity” where it has “delegate[d] responsibility for particular tasks or decisions to staff or volunteers”.

A Charity Commission alert from June 2020 warns large charities with “a more complex governance and management structure” about the “importance of transparent and accountable governance” and “of the risks which can result from governance or management failures”:

*Complexity can increase the risk of communication breakdowns, especially if oversight is weak or compromised.*

*Weaknesses in trustees’ ability to hold their executive to account, especially if coupled with a lack of*

<sup>249</sup> 249 Proby, W., 2024. “The National Trust must return to democracy”. *Telegraph*, 21 March. Available online at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/03/21/national-trust-must-return-to-democracy/>> [Accessed 20 July 2024].

<sup>250</sup> Charity Commission, 2013 [updated 2018]. *Charity trustee: what’s involved*. Available online at: <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-trustee-whats-involved>> [Accessed 14 November 2024].

*expertise in the services that the charity provides, can lead to safeguarding, governance and other failures.*

*There are also dangers of a charity growing too quickly, or pursuing funding to take on complex projects, without putting in place effective governance and oversight to manage risks.*

*Charities that have merged, or significantly expanded their operations (or may plan to do so in response to the COVID-19 pandemic) should be particularly mindful of this risk, especially when implementing new governance structures.*

*No charity is more important than its purpose.<sup>251</sup>*

The National Trust – in particular its Trustees and Chair, whose legal responsibility it is to ensure compliance with the law appear to have failed to “be mindful of the risks raised in this alert, and to take steps to mitigate them where necessary”, as required by the Charity Commission.<sup>252</sup>

Indeed, it actively “compromised” oversight and accountability, something against which the Charity Commission had specifically warned. As shown in the first section of chapter two of this report, it also deliberately changed its strategy to focus on “pursuing funding to take on complex projects”, while overlooking its core duties.

While the Charity Commission has thus far shied away from taking any action, it is imperative that it fulfils its own duty as the charities regulator by holding the National Trust and its leadership to account. If the National Trust is too large and unwieldy an organisation for the Charity Commission to keep tabs on an independent Ombudsman should be established to take on this role. This would help ensure that tenants, volunteers, staff and others have a safe and secure channel through which to seek redress of grievances, and would put an end to the existing, unworkable system whereby the National Trust's management effectively marks its own homework.

<sup>251</sup> Charity Commission, 2020. *Alert for charities – the importance of transparent and accountable governance*. 25 June. Available online at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alert-for-charities-the-importance-of-transparent-and-accountable-governance/alert-for-charities-the-importance-of-transparent-and-accountable-governance>> [Accessed 8 June 2024].

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4. Conclusion and recommendations



This report has assessed the extent to which the National Trust has been mismanaged by examining its approach to heritage conservation – or in many cases lack thereof – and its pursuit of irrelevant and often politicised initiatives. It has explored why the Trust has in many cases been reneging on its core duties, demonstrating the way in which a number of the activities it has been undertaking appear to be financially motivated. It has also identified the internal failings which have allowed these things to take place. The conclusion draws together the findings of the report and recommends potential solutions.

There seems to be strong evidence, which this report has presented in photographic form wherever possible, to indicate that under the Trust's current management the notion of heritage preservation as traditionally understood has become eclipsed in organisational importance by more "trendy" causes likelier to generate funding and expend less time and energy.

This report has shown that in spite of its virtue-signalling rhetoric and soundbites, the management has been acting in recent years with wrong motives. Ultimately, the motivation for the Trust's management to encourage this ideological decline and subversion of mission has included financial incentives, both in terms of cutting costs wherever possible, and maximising funding and income.

The report has also brought to light the cyclical nature of the problem. For example, the Trust management's replacement of long-serving, specialist staff with less qualified staff – who are presumably less grounded in heritage preservation and less likely to be critical of new organisational agendas – has exacerbated the Trust's problems by contributing to a less scholarly approach, causing both "dumbing down" and the misrepresentation of history while contributing to the physical neglect of properties.

Many of the mistakes that have been made in the National Trust are ones that would likely not have been made by those with a proper understanding of the original aims of the Trust. For example, how could it be possible for someone genuinely interested in the preservation of this nation's heritage to argue that the best approach to a Grade I-listed country house that has been ravaged by fire is to leave it in its charred state while experimenting with its interior by adding unsympathetic modern walkways? How could anyone passionate about historic paintings condone the publication of puerile captions underneath, poking fun at them? How could a long-serving and well-qualified gardener think not weeding, pruning or watering in a fine historic garden would be the right approach? It is surely not too much to ask that our major national institutions are run by people who care about the original ethos and purpose of those institutions, rather than

people who, in the words of Thomas Sowell, would replace “what works with what sounds good”.<sup>253</sup>

The external body which holds the power to address the failings within the Trust is the Charity Commission. It should use these powers to investigate the Trust and the concerns raised in this report, taking action to reverse some of the recent missteps and to prevent future repetition. It is particularly important that the failings in accountability and openness are addressed, by restoring membership democracy and requiring the Trust to be more transparent about major decisions and the spending of funds.

In relation to internal democracy, Parliament and the Charity Commission should take up the recommendations of the 2024 report *National Distrust* to prevent the continued undermining of membership democracy and to restore free and fair elections. The first recommendation is that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport should introduce a new Statutory Instrument for the National Trust to reverse amendments that were made to it by the National Trust's management to dismantle internal democracy.<sup>254</sup> The new Statutory Instrument would also prohibit anti-democratic voting mechanisms such as Quick Vote. *National Distrust's* second recommendation is for the Charity Commission to open an inquiry to identify the causes of the democratic backsliding in the Trust and to prevent future repetition.<sup>255</sup>

The National Trust's early governance referred to saving sites “of interest and value from decay and thoughtless destruction”.<sup>256</sup> Yet the Trust, once a beacon of stewardship, now appears to be driving the decay it once lamented and against which it was founded to fight. It is imperative that immediate action is taken to stop the subversion of the Trust's aims and to return this charity to its founding, statutory and charitable purposes and ethos.

To this end, and following on from the recommendations in *National Distrust*<sup>257</sup>, this report makes the following recommendations:

- 1. The Charity Commission should undertake a full audit of sites in the Trust's care and commission an independent governance review.**

The aim of an audit would be to ascertain the extent of the mismanagement and to identify sites which would benefit from the reinstatement of long-serving experts made redundant under the Trust's “Reset” programme. This exercise would also help ensure future compliance by the charity with its charitable objectives and statutory obligations.

An independent governance review undertaken by a High Court judge or a leading barrister, in the vein of the Benson Report of 1969 or the Blakenham Report of 2003, would help channel efforts to reform the management structure of the Trust and to restore good governance and accountability. The Trustees of the National Trust should have commissioned such a review; in the absence of any firm action by the Chairman, it is left to the Charity Commission to act.

| 253 Sowell, T., 1993. *Is Reality Optional? And Other Essays*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

| 254 Gebreyohanes, Z., 2024. “National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust”. *Legatum Institute*, pp.43–44.

| 255 *Ibid.*

| 256 *National Trust Annual Report 1905–06*. p.7

| 257 Gebreyohanes, Z., 2024. “National Distrust: The end of democracy in the National Trust”. *Legatum Institute*.



**2. The Charity Commission should set up an independent Ombudsman for the National Trust.**

An independent Ombudsman would create a channel to enable the redress of grievances from members, staff, volunteers and the public, a meaningful form of which does not currently exist within the Trust. This would help ensure consistent and robust external accountability, particularly given that the Charity Commission has limited time and resources given its large portfolio of charities.

**3. National Trust officials should be brought before the Culture, Media and Sport House of Commons Select Committee to answer questions.**

It is important to make sure that the National Trust stays accountable to Parliament and that it fulfils its statutory purpose. One of the ways this could be achieved is by bringing Trust officials before the Digital, Media and Sport committee and putting a set of questions to them on the departure of the Trust from its statutory mission.

**4. State funding bodies should be reformed so that they do not provide financial incentives for conservation institutions to become derailed from their core missions.**

A truly long-term solution would address the external factors which have caused or contributed to the erosion of the charity's mission, one of which is the decline of the funding bodies themselves. Funding bodies should support charities to carry out their core missions, not provide grants for charities to popularise certain agendas. The Trust's management has had an incentive to become politicised as it gets a direct monetary benefit from undertaking virtue-signalling exercises.

# Appendix



“Everyone Welcome” article, “taken from National Trust 2020 members’ magazine.”

## Everyone welcome

*Tiger de Souza is the Volunteering, Participation and Inclusion Director for the National Trust. He reflects on the Trust’s role in promoting a fairer society*

The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement this spring was a significant moment. Shortly afterwards, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations released a report titled *Home Truths: Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector*. The report outlined that systemic and institutional racism was prevalent.

At the National Trust we have a duty to play our part in creating a fairer, more equitable society. We have two responsibilities. The first is to make sure everyone feels welcome at the National Trust. That sense of belonging extends to our staff, volunteers and everyone who engages with us, from long-standing members to those visiting us for the first time. We’ve been working with our senior leaders, asking them to focus their efforts on creating inclusive cultures and access within their teams so that everyone feels valued, engaged and able to get involved. We’ve also refreshed and launched a new set of organisational values, which reflect the kind of organisation we want to be and ground everything we do in a shared understanding of what it really means to make everyone welcome.

Though we recognise a need to improve experiences for a broader ethno-cultural audience and the people of colour who work or volunteer with us, we know that we must also look at other areas of our provision. These include the accessibility of our places and our approach to interpretation and programming. Our work on inclusion is not limited to ethnicity and we remain committed to other areas of improvement, including our partnership with Alzheimer’s Society to become dementia friendly by 2022.

Rooted in our charitable objectives is a responsibility to preserve nature, beauty and history for the benefit of the nation. If only a proportion of the population feel comfortable or welcome at our places, we are collectively failing in delivering our founding principles. As Octavia Hill, one of the Trust’s founders, explained in 1883, ‘The need of quiet, the need of air, and I believe the sight of sky and of all things growing, seem human needs, common to all.’

Our second responsibility is to present the colonial history of our places in a thoughtful way that promotes productive debate and reflection. The stories we tell - or often choose not to tell - must be addressed at the same time as we review and improve our organisational culture and individual experiences. In the autumn we’re publishing research detailing the colonial links to our

places. Our teams are now working hard to translate that knowledge into how we talk about and present those places and items within our collections.

Some have asked if our work in this space is just a knee-jerk reaction to Black Lives Matter. We have been doing this work for a number of years because legacies of colonialism and slavery are a real part of the historic fabric in our hands. Our research and feedback we have received have also told us that visitors are curious about the range of different stories connected to our places. We believe they want us to explore these stories, including those that are sensitive or controversial, provided they are authentic to the specific place, that interpretation is based on sound historical research, and that we help them to explore and draw conclusions for themselves. However, there is no doubt that the Black Lives Matter movement has caused us to look at the pace of what we do.

We are a charity committed to inclusion. At the time of the most recent surge of Black Lives Matter activity, inclusive leadership training was already being delivered to senior staff across the Trust. We've curated national programmes to share stories which have often gone untold, places, we are failing such as Prejudice and Pride, in 2017, which explored LGBTQ+ heritage. Our current Colonial Countryside project, with Leicester University and primary schoolchildren, is exploring the colonial links of our places.

More than a moment, this feels like the beginning of a movement - a time of change that I hope will lead to greater equity at the Trust and wider society.

*From a National Trust magazine of 2020.*

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## PROSPERITY INSTITUTE

11 Charles Street  
London W1J 5DW  
United Kingdom  
t: +44 (0) 20 7148 5400 | [www.prosperity.com](http://www.prosperity.com)

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