

Keeping history alive

*Understanding the barriers to
Gen Z engagement with heritage*



Photo courtesy of Sudeley Castle



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Opera experience at Wollerton



Introduction



Young people (aged 16-24) are consistently the group with the lowest rates of engagement with heritage according to DCMS figures. Yet, we know that there is a significant group of young people who enjoy heritage-related or heritage-adjacent content, whether that be via TikTok, *Bridgerton* or *The Rest is History*. This study seeks to ask an already-engaged group of young people (in this case, those studying history, heritage or country-house related topics at a range of universities across the UK) about why they don't currently visit historic houses, identifying the key barriers to preventing them accessing heritage in person, and what might entice them to visit a heritage site.

Are young people put off by practical barriers? Is it simply too hard to get to Historic Houses places without a car? If so, are there solutions that could be explored through partnerships with tourism attractions in the local areas, like shuttle buses? Does there need to be better directions via public transport on a website? Is the cost of entry simply too high? Is it that they don't know what's available to visit? Is it that they think the reality will be dull, uninspiring, and not for them? Is the storytelling and interpretation on site not enough to capture their attention? Would targeted programming help draw in a younger audience? These are just some of the questions we asked participants.

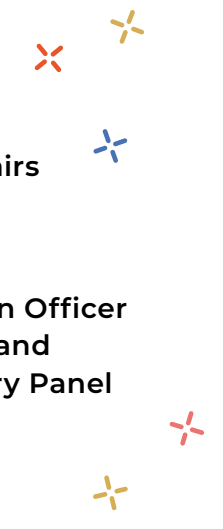
Social media is an inescapable part of modern life, and we also wanted to explore what — if anything — about heritage and history content on social media is appealing. How useful a tool is social media for engaging with a younger audience — and what might the purpose of that engagement be for Historic Houses member places? Does, or can, social media translate into visitors through the doors? Is it a good way of converting interest into visits?

We do not have all the answers to these questions. But we hope that asking them is the first step in encouraging Historic Houses places to think more about getting a new generation through their doors, and inspiring a lifelong interest in heritage.

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Between our online questionnaire and our focus groups, the following statistics emerged:

1. ***The top barrier to accessing Historic House properties is getting there (and associated costs), with 73% identifying this as a factor.***
2. ***Many found high entry fees a major barrier with 58% citing this as their reason.***
3. ***80% said they'd be willing to walk up to a mile from the nearest public transport stop.***
4. ***47% are willing to pay up to £10 for entry, with over a quarter at 27% willing to pay up to £15.***

Photo courtesy of Knebworth House

Practical barriers to access

In 2018, research by Ecclesiastical showed that stately homes were the least popular museum or heritage site for 18-30 year olds to engage with: museums were the most popular.¹ Museums have a significant advantage: they are often urban, and many are free (or very low cost) to visit. Our survey, which spoke to a group who are actively engaged with this sector, still cite that their biggest barrier is getting there and the associated costs, with nearly three quarters (73%) highlighting these as their main barrier to visiting a historic house.

Many of our respondents felt that even though they're a demographic without much disposable income, not enough is done by heritage sites to attract them through ticket price reductions.² However, 47% of respondents were willing to pay up to £10 for entry, and just over a quarter were willing to pay up to £15. Respondents highlighted that if they are paying a higher entry fee, they want to feel like they're getting value for money — i.e. a full day out. Several suggested that a well-marketed 'young' (16-25) or 'student' concession would be something that would actively encourage them to visit.³

'If the cost of entry is more than twenty pounds for a one off visit then this is majorly off-putting for me. The only way I would spend this much is if it the ticket then grants you entry for a year, or a period of time after the original visit.'

1. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2018/12/10122018-fifth-young-people-never-visit-museums/>
2. Compare this to the wide variety of 16-25 discount schemes by other visitor attractions, including cinemas, theatres and many 'pay-for-entry' exhibitions at museums. The National Trust in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and English Heritage both offer annual 'student' subscriptions. The Young Scot National Entitlement Card is available to 11 to 26-year-olds living in Scotland.
3. Several EU countries offer reduced Under 30 schemes, and even within the broader UK cultural sphere, 'Young' memberships are common.



Go behind the scenes in the Gothic Library © Stowe House Preservation Trust, photo by Megan Taylor

Special events and workshops were highlighted as an excellent hook to encourage visits. From jousting tournaments to special exhibitions, food fairs to techno festivals, many of our focus groups spoke about accessing sites through heritage-adjacent means in the first instance. Hooking in a younger audience through events and activities is clearly an effective tool.

'It's making the trip worthwhile which is the main problem. Having enough to do beyond visiting the property considering there would be hours worth of driving involved.'

'I understand why entrance costs are necessary, but sometimes the spending the extra money is hard to justify, especially is the house is only small/would not take long to look around.'

Many noted historic house websites were primarily aimed at administrative and practical information, with little or no information to sell or market the property and its history to potential visitors. Investing in a better website experience would be a simple way to improve visibility and accessibility, whilst recognising the fact that websites are the first way the vast majority of people will encounter a historic house in the 21st century.

Making history come alive

EXPERIENCES

Historic Houses member places are under huge pressures in terms of their interpretation and offers of experiences. Recent trends show people are increasingly interested in spending more on 'memorable experiences': a recent survey showed 18-24 year olds were significantly higher than the national average in their desire to do this.⁴ VisitBritain's research suggests 'experiential' tourism is very much on the rise.

This plays out in our findings. Almost all of those surveyed talked about the appeal of 'behind the scenes' tours, 'hands-on' conservation workshops, and 'limited edition' experiences, and the vast majority suggested they would be happy to pay a (relative) premium for this. Not only did participants feel it would add to their experience through a sense of exclusivity, but would assist those who would like to consider a career in the sector. Allowing visitors to engage with guides and those who worked there was a key factor that

'behind-the-scenes stuff [is] fascinating and would engender more support and respect for the site and organisation if people could see how much work it takes to keep sites open.'

stood out and something that created a unique experience, with people keen to talk about what they were seeing and experiencing.

Despite popular perceptions of Gen Z, our research suggested the vast majority disliked QR codes and other digital interpretation. They cited that they liked the opportunity heritage sites provided to put their phones away, turn off technology and engage with the place and people around them.

4. <https://home.barclays/insights-old/2024/06/making-memories--the-rise-of-the-experience-economy/#:~:text=Also%20telling%20is%20that%2013,experienced%20than%20something%20they%20bought.>

Interpretation & storytelling



Participants were keen to impress on us that they did not want a 'museum' experience: they were actively not interested in learning about objects or collections in isolation, regardless of their quality. They were, however, interested in objects in direct relation to their connection to broader histories of place and people. Emphasis was placed on social history — a house as a 'home' and the way life was lived there in the past, for everyone both below and above stairs.

'The issue with historic houses is the formulaic response to history. They make it undigestible for anyone with a casual interest which cuts off a lot of revenue. History needs to be exciting and in some of these places you have to look for the excitement'

Some cited there was little middle ground in terms of interpretation: places either had overly simplistic interpretation with major knowledge gaps and no way for visitors to supplement them, or that it was extremely complex and confusing. There was a general desire for a 'middle' way — and for opportunities to delve deeper post-visit, through online research. Several said this was difficult as houses and collections often had sparse online presence. We were impressed by the high standards and demanding nature of those we spoke to: this is an engaged, interested audience.

Those we spoke to also viewed the prospect of talking about 'contested history' as non-negotiable, and needing to feel that attempts

to engage with colonial histories, for example, were not simply a tick-box exercise. There was a widespread belief that heritage sites should directly engage with their links to histories of empire and broader global histories, not least because there are interesting and important stories to tell. There was little sense of moral judgement of the past, but simply the ask that historic houses spend time researching these aspects of their history (if applicable) and present them to visitors accordingly.

'Many historic houses' pasts are enshrined unaddressed colonialism and inequality (e.g. past uses as hospitals, workhouses, etc. contributing to ableism and oppression) and young people do recognise and think about these things more than you'd expect.'

'I feel... a certain narrative of history is set, directing its visitors to learn history from the perspective of, for example, the British. I think this should not be the case. There should be a degree of accountability and active efforts to include different perspectives when showcasing collections. This would be beneficial in terms of educating visitors on more nuanced interpretations of history and I think it would also invite a wider audience to visit.'

Beyond simply colonial history, participants also cited interests in gender, LGBTQ+, and class histories. Several also mentioned that seeing these histories presented or framed more positively would be a welcome change.

'I'm more likely to visit historic places with up-to-date interpretation, clear visual and narrative purpose that addresses their past, especially through interesting cultural programming'

Consuming history & heritage at home

Although many might want to 'escape' technology when they're actually at a heritage site, we know that social media is a key way people engage with heritage and history at home. 89% of the UK population now uses a form of social media, and social media also provides an opportunity for international audiences to engage with UK heritage sites in real time.⁵

Our conversations revealed mixed results regarding social media. By no means were all respondents glued to their phones, nor did all of them have TikTok. For those who did engage with social media, they felt that it was important for heritage sites to engage with 'Gen Z' trends authentically.

What should this content be made up of? Our participants felt a good way to do this was to engage with established content creators creating an easy way to reach a broader audience with a mixture of content. Many cited feeling patronised by sites following 'Gen Z' TikTok trends, preferring to see original and appealing content. Some also noted it was painfully apparent when those running social media channels clearly did not use social media regularly, or in a similar way to the audience they were trying to reach.

A broader theme suggested enjoying seeing a wide range of content, mixing history, stories, trends and what's happening on the ground at places with factual information and marketing about upcoming events.

'Sometimes I feel as though heritage sites are asking me to meet them where they're at in the way they use social media, when actually, they need to meet me where I'm at.'



Survey respondents included the following as examples:

- ♦ Humorous
- ♦ Visually aesthetic
- ♦ Behind the scenes or spaces which aren't normally visited
- ♦ Curators/volunteers/guides showing their favourite objects/explaining them with enthusiasm
- ♦ Unusual facts
- ♦ Events

Many gave examples of sites they thought used social media well, including the Black Country Living Museum, the Museum of English Rural Life and Hever Castle.

5. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-2024/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2024.pdf?v=321395>



Video camera training
Photo courtesy of Wentworth Woodhouse

'Nothing beats going there in person'



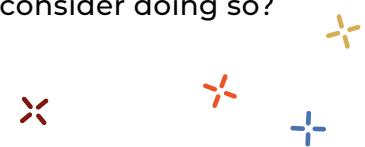
Young people are a potentially captive audience, but they are one with high standards, who demand a lot from their visit. The majority of our respondents were, of course, highly educated, but more broadly, the 25 and under demographic has a better awareness of global events and connections, as well as broader social and environmental inequality, than any generation before them. No longer are they willing to simply accept a standard tour of a property, washing over the rough edges of history. They want value for money, a well thought through experience, engaging interpretation and the opportunity to learn.

With this in mind, some of our practical recommendations for houses seeking to engage more with a younger audience are:

- ♦ Consider introducing a concession ticket for young people.
- ♦ Consider refreshing and expanding your website content. This doesn't have to be hugely time-consuming: AI can be your friend here.
- ♦ While you're thinking about your website, add in (if you haven't already) possible ways to visit by public transport: [GoodJourney](#) is a great resource. Try reaching your property by public transport if you haven't before — see if it's possible!
- ♦ Think about refreshing interpretation and/or tour content. Consider bringing in a focus group to give honest feedback on the content. How easy is it to follow?

Are there things people want to know more about? Are there glaring gaps in the history you're telling — and if so, why? Is there new research you could add in?

- ♦ Don't assume younger audiences love digital experiences. Is an app or QR code right for your site or the stories you want to tell? Think hard about who you're hoping to better engage with technology, and what it's adding to the experience.
- ♦ Young people are keen on experiences. Whether this be engaging with staff who work behind the scenes so a better understanding of conservation can be ascertained, a hands-on workshop, or a chance to do something creative, young people are often keen on more than simply a 'standard' tour. These can also be useful revenue generation activities! For example, Chelsea Physic Garden runs ['Gardening in Small Spaces'](#) workshops (perfect for young people who might live in flat or houseshares); Charleston draws on its own queer history to run [Queer Bloomsbury](#); Chatsworth runs [Goat Yoga](#) — a rather unique experience, we imagine.
- ♦ Social media can be a useful tool to engage with people in the long term, and to build a potential audience — even if these do not translate into immediate visits. Who's running your social media, and what are they hoping to achieve from it? If you do want to reach Gen Z through social media, are there more engaging or new ways you could consider doing so?





This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor a prescriptive one. Our research project was deliberately narrowly designed, and we are aware we have spoken to a specific demographic. However, our findings are broadly in line with bigger social studies of Gen Z, and we hope that they prove useful to Historic Houses members who are keen to pro-actively engage with a younger audience.

We were struck by the enthusiasm, thoughtfulness and engagement of participants, who showed a genuine interest in heritage and history, with a clear appetite to visit heritage sites and to be part of broader national conversations about history, heritage and the past. This is the next generation, and if we are to secure

the longevity and prosperity of heritage, they need to be invested in, and appreciate, Historic Houses places too.

From a more practical perspective, we heard time and time again from those we spoke to that whilst they were cost conscious, they were willing to spend good money on 'big days out' and special experiences. Developing exciting, innovative or appealing programming at Historic Houses member places not only has the potential to capture a younger audience, but also provide helpful revenue streams.

This report seeks to provide inspiration, ideas and insight. We hope you find it both interesting and informative.



Experience the magic of Christmas at Boughton House



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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HISTORIC
HOUSES