

TEMPLE
NEWSAM

Public Houses Conference Report

What makes civic custodianship of
historic house museums in Britain
different and where next?



9th – 10th October 2024, Temple Newsam, Leeds



Foreword

Leeds City Council is to be congratulated for holding the Public Houses Conference at this critical time for Council-managed historic houses, and for the delivery of museums and heritage by local government more generally.

Local authorities are facing a perfect financial storm as the demand for social care and children's services spiral at a time of austerity and a cost-of-living crisis. This has resulted in budgetary challenges across all non-statutory services and museums and heritage functions have been no exception. We are now at a crossroads and if concerted action is not taken, we are in danger of irreparable damage being done to our historic houses.

The historic houses provided by local authorities are an essential part of the broader network of civic museums that spans our towns, cities, and counties. They play a key role in preserving our historic assets and offer valuable benefits to our communities. The English Civic Museums Network is proud to represent the sector at a national level, working closely with government and key sector partners such as Arts Council England, the Heritage Fund and the Museums Association.

The Network has made considerable progress in the last twelve months, securing resources from ACE and the Heritage Fund to review the policy landscape as we approached the general election, co-hosting a parliamentary reception and submitting a bold ask for additional resources to the new government as part of the autumn spending review. We look forward to working with local and national government partners to ensure a sustainable future for our historic houses. This conference has provided a vital forum and unique insights into how this consensus can be developed.

Jon Finch

Chair, English Civic Museums Network

Executive Summary

The Public Houses conference set out to explore what makes historic house museums cared for by local authorities distinct, and what the future for them could and should look like.

Sharing insights from within and beyond the local authority sector, the conference confirmed wide interest in the topic especially given the economic climate in which local authorities are now operating.

Public Houses helped to illuminate the special position and characteristics of civic custodianship of historic houses whilst highlighting areas of commonality with other forms of ownership and care. As custodians of some of the most significant historic houses in the UK, in predominantly urban locations, and working closely with other council services, civic museums are uniquely well placed to make their offer more relevant to more people.

However, those same museums are also exposed to strong economic headwinds and those that have diversified least are, arguably, most vulnerable to closure. There is more work needed to fully under the role that 'civicness' plays for the visitor. Articulating more clearly the public benefit, learning from the agility of independent and privately managed houses, and observing historic conditions for change, offer ways forward.

So too, working together to research the relationship between outside and inside historic house museums which were often acquired for the amenity value of the surrounding land, which continues to attract far more users than inside historic houses. Delegates agreed that there is value in forming a network of practice, sharing knowledge and experience, and reconvening.

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Introduction

The interdisciplinary conference, *Public Houses: What makes civic custodianship of historic house museums in Britain different and where next?* focused on historic house museums in the care of local authorities.

The conference explored the distinctiveness (or otherwise) of historic house museums in local authority custodianship, based on key case study examples of historic and contemporary custodianship. It sought to highlight the challenges of maintaining and sustaining historic house museums in this context, as well as considering opportunities within the sector for ensuring a sustainable future for them.

Public Houses attracted a wide range of museum and historic house practitioners from within and beyond the civic sector, as well as academics and representatives from key funding bodies (see list of delegates in Appendix 2). Over two days, four main panels focused on the key topics of the conference; the nature of civic custodianship; the challenges and opportunities for historic house museums in local authorities; new practice case studies; and looking to the future of civic custodianship (see Appendix 1).

The main themes that shaped the conference discussions were:

- How can historic house museums be part of community health and wellbeing, as well as recreation?
- How can the historic house museum maintain its relevance to local communities?
- What role does expertise, skills and specialist knowledge play in historic house museums?
- What do visitors to historic house museums want/think? Who are the visitors to historic house museums?
- What role does local authority governance play in historic house museums?
- How can we ensure that historic house museums are appropriately funded and sustainable?
- What makes the public historic house ‘civic’ and what does ‘civicness’ mean today?

The key conference outcomes were:

- Exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of the civic custodianship model
- Establishing a network in an area where there is currently a gap
- Sharing of best practice
- Increase resilience of sector through future proof and horizon scanning awareness
- Influencing decision makers and funders
- Professional development

This report briefly sets the conference into context, before highlighting some key issues and insights that emerged during *Public Houses*. It concludes with some recommendations to build on the momentum generated.



Context

Local authorities care for some of the UK's most significant historic house museums, defined here as houses of historic significance that operate as a museum.

Whilst historic house museums are often a source of pride for local people, with many acting as national treasure houses, as well as being key educational and recreational resources, they place an enormous burden of care on cash-strapped councils. As the operating context for local authorities changes, putting increasing emphasis on partnership working, more sustainable alternative uses, 'public entrepreneurship', community engagement, and heritage driven regeneration, the purpose and practice of civic custodianship is being redefined and reimagined.

Museums in the local authority sector constitute at least 31% of England's accredited museums.¹ Their collections, sites and stories are a core part of England's national story, and they tend to take the 'long view of the story of a place, contextualising global events with local issues'.² Historic house museums are a key part of this public story and are often 'figurehead' amenities for local communities. For many members of the public, their first museum visit will be to a local museum, and given their close proximity to population centres, civic historic house museums can have potentially a special role to play throughout the lives of local people.

In June 2020, a submission by the English Civic Museums Network to a DCMS Select Committee call for evidence on the impact of Covid-19 described civic museums as 'socially purposeful, trusted civic spaces... [which] have great potential to shape place-based recovery and to be agents of... reconciliation in our towns and cities'. And never has that been more needed. The 'civic' is under the microscope – as the riots and civil unrest in various English towns and cities in the summer of 2024 demonstrated.

Yet, as the context for civic museums is increasingly challenging and the role and purpose of the public museum is changing, the pressures on the historic house museum are becoming more acute. The Public Houses conference therefore came at a crucial juncture for civic historic house museums. Councils in the UK are under pressure to deliver a range of services with limited finances. Although local authorities remain the largest

funder of civic museums, their total revenue support for museums has decreased from £286M in 2009/10 to £243M in 2021/22, a decrease of 34% in real terms³ and this is impacting on what kind of service they can deliver. This intensifies the call for historic house museums to justify public investment. This is particularly pressing for historic house museums which have limited appeal, or those that have yet to diversify their offer.

All of this comes at a time of renewed intellectual and popular interest in historic houses. The V&A and the National Trust's British Academy funded 24-month research project, 'The Public Country House: Treasure of Quiet Beauty or a Site for Public Histories?', provides evidence of a body of interest in the subject of historic house museums and the question of public benefit. This scholarly interest has been stimulated in part by the true extent of Britain's involvement in the trade in enslaved people, revealed most comprehensively in University College London's Legacies of British Slavery (published online in 2018). The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement has made the connection between historic houses as sites of historic exploitation, and present-day racial injustice, more apparent. In the foment of 'culture wars', grand country houses are large and obvious symbols of Britain's unequal past and call into question to what extent this permeates society today and how the legacies of these injustices should be dealt with in the future. Despite this, given their artistic, architectural, historic, and social significance, historic house museums have the potential to be a unifying space, holding as Gus Casely-Hayford, Director of V&A East, put it, 'art that binds us together.'⁴

At Temple Newsam and Lotherton, the need to create a more resilient and sustainable business model, and a more community-centred visitor offer, have led Leeds City Council to reflect on its role as custodian of this civic historic house museum. Temple Newsam Estate recently celebrated 100 years of local authority ownership and care. This conference was therefore considered an appropriate and effective place and opportunity to reflect on the special nature of civic custodianship of historic house museums.



Emerging issues and insights

The conference was organised around two main questions and these have been used to group emerging issues and insights. References to particular papers (e.g. PHC5) are given in brackets (please refer to the conference programme in Appendix 1).

a. What is distinctive about civic custodianship of historic house museums?

After private ownership, local authorities are the second largest custodian and single largest funder of historic house museums in the UK [PHC5].

1. A high proportion of these (from initial research, as high as 87%) are Grade I, II*, or II listed [PHC5].
2. They are principally in urban locations [PHC5].
3. More than half of local authority owned historic house museums are presented as former lived-in houses, the rest are museums within houses (i.e. there is little or no interpretation of the building as a former home) [PHC5].
4. As well as their location and type, another characteristic of local authority run historic house museums is the extent to which they are 'democratised' (used to drive a social agenda), though this varies from site to site [PHC1].
5. In the history of civic custodianship of historic houses, there have been cycles of interest in civic use of houses and greenspace affected by supply of properties from private ownership, their proximity to metropolitan areas, and waves of municipal socialism [PHC1][PHC2].
6. Key individuals (like C.R. Ashbee, and Ernest Gowers) have acted as 'influencers' and supporters through mapping and reporting of historic house museums [PHC1].
7. Given pressures on council budgets, and difficulties defining public benefit, many local authority run historic house museums are cash-starved and challenging to maintain, although there are pressures across other forms of ownership: independent, private, National Trust, and so on [PHC2].
8. 'Civicness' as a concept might affect visitor expectations, but more research is needed to establish whether civic custodianship is an influencing factor both for visiting and as a sense of local/civic pride.

9. There may be a need to 'flex' classifications such as 'dec arts' and even 'historic house museum' which might not mean much to visitors.
10. Given that another distinguishing feature of civic museums is the fact that local visitors are also likely to be taxpayers and voters, the conference asked whether it is important for local authority run historic house museums in particular to be a 'consistent feature' in the lives of local people? What role could they play at various stages of someone's life? [PHC14]
11. Politically, is there an issue particularly with former homes of a social elite now in civic hands and their compatibility with notions of public service? [PHC1]
12. There are many common issues shared with non-civic historic house museums such as: the fixedness of the offer in houses presented as such, lack of relevance and varying levels of comfort with the visit itself, the increasing importance of authenticity of the intangible and what isn't obvious in historic house museums (but is an essential part of their past), the stark difference between visitor use of outdoors compared to indoors (though an appreciation that these are not always 'compatible'), the desire to learn during a visit (albeit in different ways) [PHC7][PHC8].
13. What is the relationship between inside and outside historic house museums and how has this changed. The purpose of visits to those using the parkland around historic houses and those visiting inside the house may be incompatible so is it wise to compare the two only in terms of visitor numbers? [PHC16][PHC19]
14. Cognitive dissonance may also play a factor: potential visitors may know that visiting the house will have wellbeing or academic benefits, but aren't comfortable stepping over the threshold, and people who have visited the house before and don't want to go back [PHC19].

b. What does the future hold for civic custodianship?

1. Taking the long view of the evolution of historic house museums in the UK, disruption and change is normal [PHC2][PHC7].
2. No one model is 'right' for long term viability – there are operating challenges within charitable trusts and local authorities alike [PHC18][PHC19].

New models and philosophies of care and use are more prevalent in the private and independent sector (e.g. Wentworth Woodhouse and its emphasis on making history through current use) but a significant number of local authorities are developing methodologies for discovering what users and non-users find meaningful [PHC8][PHC12][PHC13][PHC14][PHC18].

3. Organisations like the National Trust are taking a wider view to discern purpose (past, present, future) and use, and empowering local teams to have the confidence 'to disrupt the fixedness of historic interiors' [PHC7].
4. Given the urban context of many local authority run historic house museums, there is a real opportunity to focus on relevance and utility [PHC5].
5. A common feature of all historic house museums is their beauty: this shouldn't be taken for granted and they can provide a purposeful unifying space. However, most organisations are moving away from showroom presentation alone [PHC2].
6. Bodies like National Lottery Heritage Fund often play a role in convening / brokering projects as well as providing funding [PHC19].
7. Many custodians would benefit from sharing knowledge of specialists with others [PHC10].

Recommendations

To form a Public Houses **network of practice**: share contact details, presentations, and details of specialist services with all delegates.



To plan **future workshops and conferences**: organise a workshop in 2025; propose a session on historic house museums at the Museums Association Conference 2026, and hold another Public Houses conference in 2026 at a local



To create a **shared research framework around**:

- Mapping and benchmarking historic house museums (especially in local authority care)
- Gauging relevance and forming methodologies
- Environmental sustainability
- Relationship between outside and inside
- Sustainability and viability models



Acknowledgements

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Conference Programme

PHC1	The Civic Historic House: Lodestone or Millstone?	Simon Thurley CBE
PHC2	When Others Fail: The role of Public Authorities in saving historic houses	Ben Cowell
PHC3	Malahide Castle: The vanguard of Irish heritage	Cathal Dowd-Smith
PHC4	From Private to Public? Access to Yorkshire parks and gardens of special historic interest since the early 18th century	Edward Cartwright
PHC5	Historic House Museum or Museum in a Historic House? Mapping the collections, curation and characteristics of local authority historic house museums in the UK	Adam Toole
PHC6	‘A living work of art’. The historic house as home for modern art: retracing Leeds Art Gallery’s wartime years at Temple Newsam	Clare Nadal
PHC7	Public Benefit and Curatorial Decision Making	Tarnya Cooper and Oliver Cox
PHC8	Agreeing what matters: drawing inspiration from co-design and citizen’s assembly approaches to establish significance	Eleanor Harding and Caitlin Kight
PHC9	Beyond art and calibration: creating relevance at Temple Newsam House	Rathinambal Tamilselvan
PHC10	Bricks, beams and balustrades: operational opportunities and challenges conserving historic house museums	Maya Harrison

PHC11	Citizen Partnership & Public Houses	Sarah Bradbury and Simon Coates
PHC12	Cracking Ceramics Project: a case study in building partnerships, engaging new audiences and developing specialist expertise	Melissa Gallimore
PHC13	Sewerby Hall & Gardens: investigating young children’s use of language	Lucy Cooke and Abigail Hackett
PHC14	Newstead Abbey: curating a local authority house in partnership with the public	Simon Brown
PHC15	Pickford’s House: the reimagined home	Laura Phillips and Sophie Campbell
PHC16	Environmental change and deterioration: what can civic historic house museums do about it and why	Peter Goodchild
PHC17	Waking Sleeping Beauty: reimagining the English country house for the 21st century – Harewood House	Rachel Crewes
PHC18	Wentworth Woodhouse: changing lives, supporting communities	Sarah McLeod
PHC19	Public houses? Key themes and issues	Panel discussion: David Hopes, Rebecca Ball, Helen Featherstone, Lynne Minett

List of attendees

Speakers/Panellists

- Abigail Hackett** Sheffield Hallam University
- Adam Toole** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Ben Cowell** Historic Houses
- Caitlin Kight** University of Exeter
- Cathal Dowd-Smith** Newbridge House and Farm / Malahide Castle and Garden
- Clare Nadal** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Councillor Salma Arif** Leeds City Council
- David Hopes** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Edward Cartwright** Purcell UK
- Eleanor Harding** National Trust
- Helen Featherstone** National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Kate Fellows** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Laura Phillips** Derby Museums
- Lucy Cooke** Sewerby Hall and Gardens
- Lynne Minett** Heritage and Museums, Barnsley Council
- Mark Westgarth** University of Leeds
- Maya Harrison** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Melissa Gallimore** Barnsley Council / Cannon Hall Museum
- Peter Goodchild** Conservationist and Educator, Garden and Landscape Heritage
- Rachel Crewes**, Harewood House Trust
- Rathinambal Tamilselvan**, Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Rebecca Ball** Arts Council England
- Sarah Bradbury** National Trust
- Sarah McLeod** Wentworth Woodhouse
- Simon Brown** Newstead Abbey
- Simon Coates** National Trust
- Simon Thurley CBE** National Heritage Memorial Fund / National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Tarnya Cooper** National Trust

Delegates

- Abbey Rutherford** Purcell UK
- Alasdair Hutson** The Burton Constable Foundation
- Alistair Brown** National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Amanda Perfect** Tate Britain
- Amy Dearnaley** Astley Hall Museum and Art Gallery / South Ribble Museum
- Andrew Hanley** Independent
- Caroline Newton** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Caroline Rawson** English Heritage
- Caroline Storr** Rochdale Borough Council
- Chris Hill**, Science Museum Group (3 delegates)
- Dionne Matthews** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums & Galleries
- Eleanor Brooke-Peat** Castle Howard Estate Ltd
- Georgia Rose-Garside** Buttress Architects (3 delegates)
- Gillian Greaves** Arts Council England
- Graham Jones** Cheshire East Council / Tatton Park
- Jacqueline Sharp** Tricolor Associates
- Jessica Hewitson** National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Jocelyn Anderson-Wood** Harewood House Trust (2 delegates)
- Judith Ferris** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums and Galleries
- Linn Robinson** Stockport Council / Bramhall Hall (2 delegates)
- Lisa Broadest** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums and Galleries
- Lynda Jackson** Lancashire County County / Judges' Lodgings Museum
- Maria Akers** Leeds City Council / Parks and Green Spaces
- Martin Hamilton** Leeds Civic Trust
- Nat Edwards** Royal Armouries
- Natalie Murray** Barnsley Museums
- Pauline Wood** Manchester City Council (5 delegates)
- Rebecca Johnson Blackburn** Darwen Borough Council
- Richard Pollitt** City of York Council / Ripon Museum Trust
- Rural Solutions Ltd**
- Sara Merritt** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums and Galleries
- Sarah Roller** Historic Houses
- Simon Stephens** Museums Association
- Sonya McDonald** Leeds City Council / Parks and Green Spaces
- Tracy Lisamore** National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Yvonne Hardman** Leeds City Council / Leeds Museums and Galleries



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