



HERITAGE CONNECTION

Scoping and Sounding the Field



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By Carly W. Butler^a, Miles Richardson^a, Maya Kirton^a, Tom Dommett^b and Shannon Hogan^b

^a University of Derby ^b National Trust

Design by: Joe Eden

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I. Executive Summary

This report documents the Heritage Connection: Scoping and Sounding the Field project, funded by the University of Derby's Vice-Chancellor's Partnership Award and carried out in collaboration with the National Trust. It explores the emerging concept of heritage connectedness – a person's subjective sense of relationship with heritage – through a review of literature, roundtables and workshops with heritage professionals and a pilot study testing a heritage connection intervention. The overall aims were to advance theoretical and practical understanding of heritage connectedness, and develop an agenda for research, practice and policy.

Conceptual and Empirical Foundations

Heritage connection is proposed as a psychological construct that refers to an individual's sense of relationship with heritage. It has cognitive (e.g. knowledge, meaning), emotional (e.g. joy, empathy, awe) and behavioural (e.g. visiting, volunteering).

Our initial research explored how people understood heritage connection, tested use of a simple heritage connection scale, and found that heritage connection predicted wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviour at similar levels to nature connectedness.

Related research

While the construct of heritage connectedness has not been formalised in past research, research on people's sense of relationship with place and other people over time has been published over a diverse range of disciplines. As part of the 'relational turn', recent work is exploring a broad concept of 'connectedness' as key to wellbeing and sustainability.

Research on place, heritage and

wellbeing, and heritage engagement form three key threads within the literature, most closely allied with the concept of heritage connection.

Subjective wellbeing, belonging, sense of identity, meaning and purpose are key benefits of heritage, supporting individual wellbeing and community cohesion. Heritage engagement involves sensory, emotional, and meaningful experiences.

While heritage studies is a broadly multi-disciplinary area, there is limited integration across disciplines. Heritage is rarely considered within psychology, even though much of the research themes are well-suited to psychological enquiry and methodologies.

Heritage connection could offer a psychological perspective to nurture interdisciplinary research, help extend understandings of emotional bonds beyond notions of 'place', provide a means of capturing meaning-related aspects of wellbeing and heritage values, and develop new relational frameworks for understanding heritage engagement. More broadly, it can incorporate time and temporality into models of connectedness and help emphasise the value of heritage for a sense of belonging in the world.

Professional perspectives

Roundtables and a workshop revealed heritage connection as emotional, everyday, and socially significant. A sense of connection allows people to feel part of a bigger story and link individuals and communities to each other and to place. The notion of heritage connection aligns with approaches that emphasise heritage as process and practice. Key issues include unequal access, structural challenges, and contested meanings of heritage. Storytelling, sensory engagement, and co-creation were identified as key strategies for nurturing connection. There are many excellent examples of programmes, initiatives and events that connect people with heritage, including those that support co-production and ownership by communities. Systemic issues raise challenges. There was a focus on the language of 'heritage' and 'heritage connection' – such terms are not necessarily meaningful to people.



Pilot Heritage Trail

We designed a heritage trail with invitations to notice, engage with and reflect on heritage in a walled garden in a National Trust site. Participants received a booklet with a map showing places to pause and engage with the prompts. A pre-post design compared scores before and after the trail. Heritage connectedness was boosted by 31%, along with increased happiness and nature connectedness. This offers proof of concept, suggesting it is feasible to develop interventions aiming to increase people's sense of connection to past and place in relation to self.

Conclusions

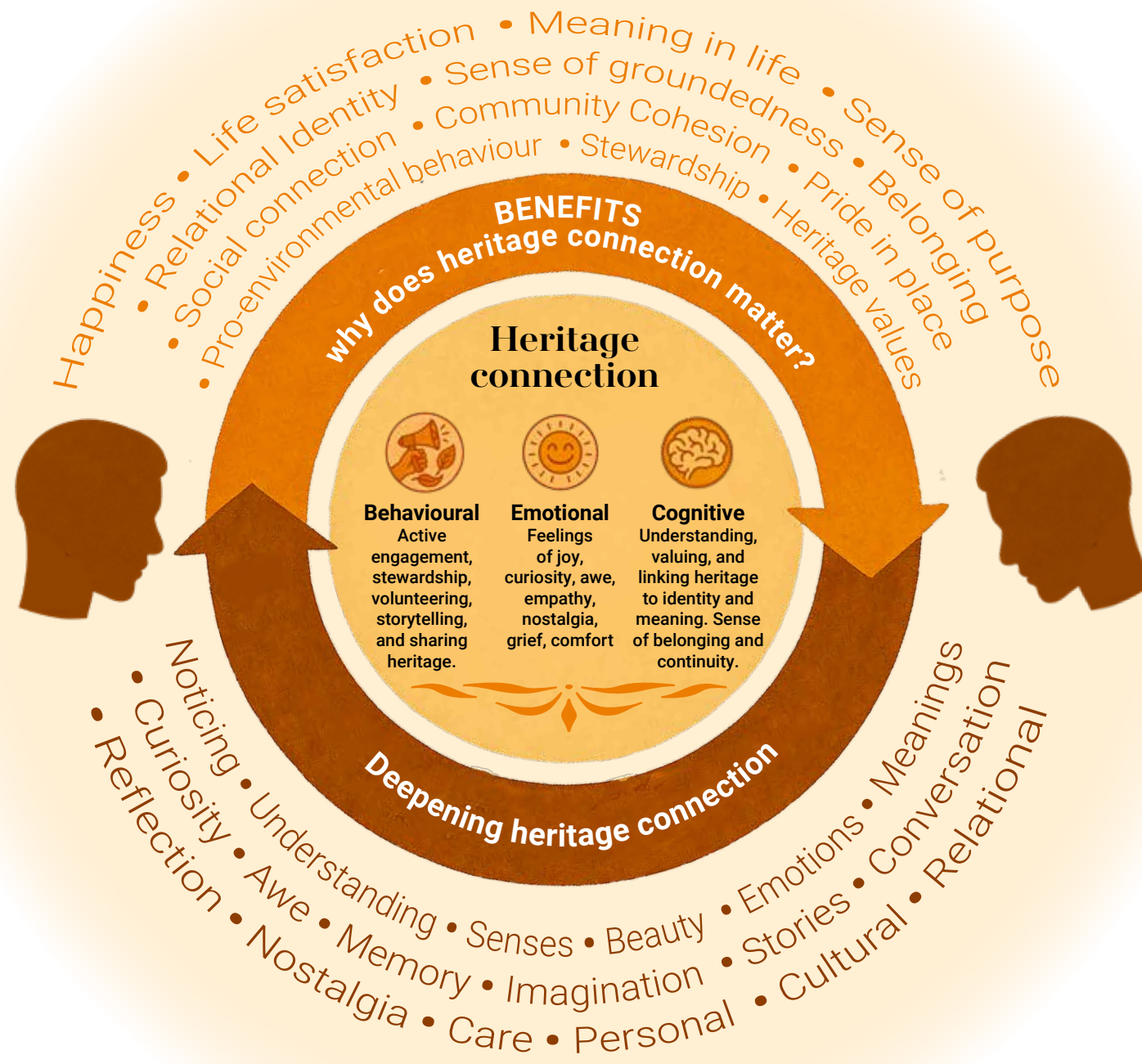
Heritage connection is about meaningful, relational engagement with heritage, through thoughts, feelings, and actions that shape a sense of oneself in relation to time, place and other people.

Heritage connection is personal and diverse, requiring inclusive, participatory approaches that embrace multiple narratives and support safe engagement with complex or difficult histories.

Heritage connection supports individual and community wellbeing, fostering happiness, meaning, and social cohesion through relationships with self, place, and others.

Heritage connection can be strengthened through intentional pathways, such as sensory, imaginative, and reflective experiences, creating opportunities for deeper engagement and wider integration into practice and policy.

Heritage connection offers a unique conceptual and practical contribution, providing a measurable, relational framework that can capture wellbeing benefits, inform evaluation, and guide interventions.





2. Background and context

The University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group (NCRG) are internationally recognised leaders in research and application of the science of human-nature relationships. Their pioneering work focuses on transformational change in people's relationships with nature to tackle the biodiversity and climate crises and improve the wellbeing of humans and the more-than-human world. Their award-winning impact has developed through multi-sector partnerships and collaborations with environmental NGOs, government bodies, public service organisations; and SMEs. Their work has international impact, transforming policy and practice in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, USA, Spain, Greenland and beyond.

Through world-leading research, knowledge exchange, and consultancy, NCRG have directly

shaped the design and delivery of initiatives aimed at connecting people with nature, and empowered thousands of others to apply nature connection science in their own areas of work, uniting the wellbeing of people and planet. Recognising the crucial need for more relationally oriented ways of being in the world, they have begun to explore the concept and

“The National Trust is the largest conservation charity in Europe, with more than 5 million members”

importance of connection with heritage and people's sense of relationship with place and people over time.

The National Trust is the largest conservation charity in Europe, with more than 5 million members and a diverse portfolio of historic buildings and landscapes across 250,000ha in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Its primary purpose is to protect and conserve special places for the benefit of the nation. To do this they work collaboratively with other organisations and local communities to protect and care for the built and natural environment. The National Trust's strategic ambition is to be a catalyst for societal change through a greater sense of belonging and connection with heritage, leaving a nation more invested in nature and culture, for themselves and future generations, by 2050. As well as working to Restore Nature, the Trust's goals are to End Unequal Access to nature, beauty and history by deepening public engagement with places and with the past; and to Inspire Millions to care for their heritage by helping people feel more personally invested in the past. The National Trust seeks to make heritage more inclusive and relevant and works towards a vision of a future where heritage is not only protected but actively lived and felt.

The University of Derby and the National Trust have been working together for over a decade. The collaboration began with a focus on nature connectedness, including the redesign and development of the '50 Things to do before you're 11 3/4" programme which was redesigned to include activities that supported a closer relationship with the natural world. The National Trust continued to embed the science and practice of nature connection within the organisation as part of their relational approach to engagement – creating opportunities for people and communities to connect with nature, heritage, and each other.

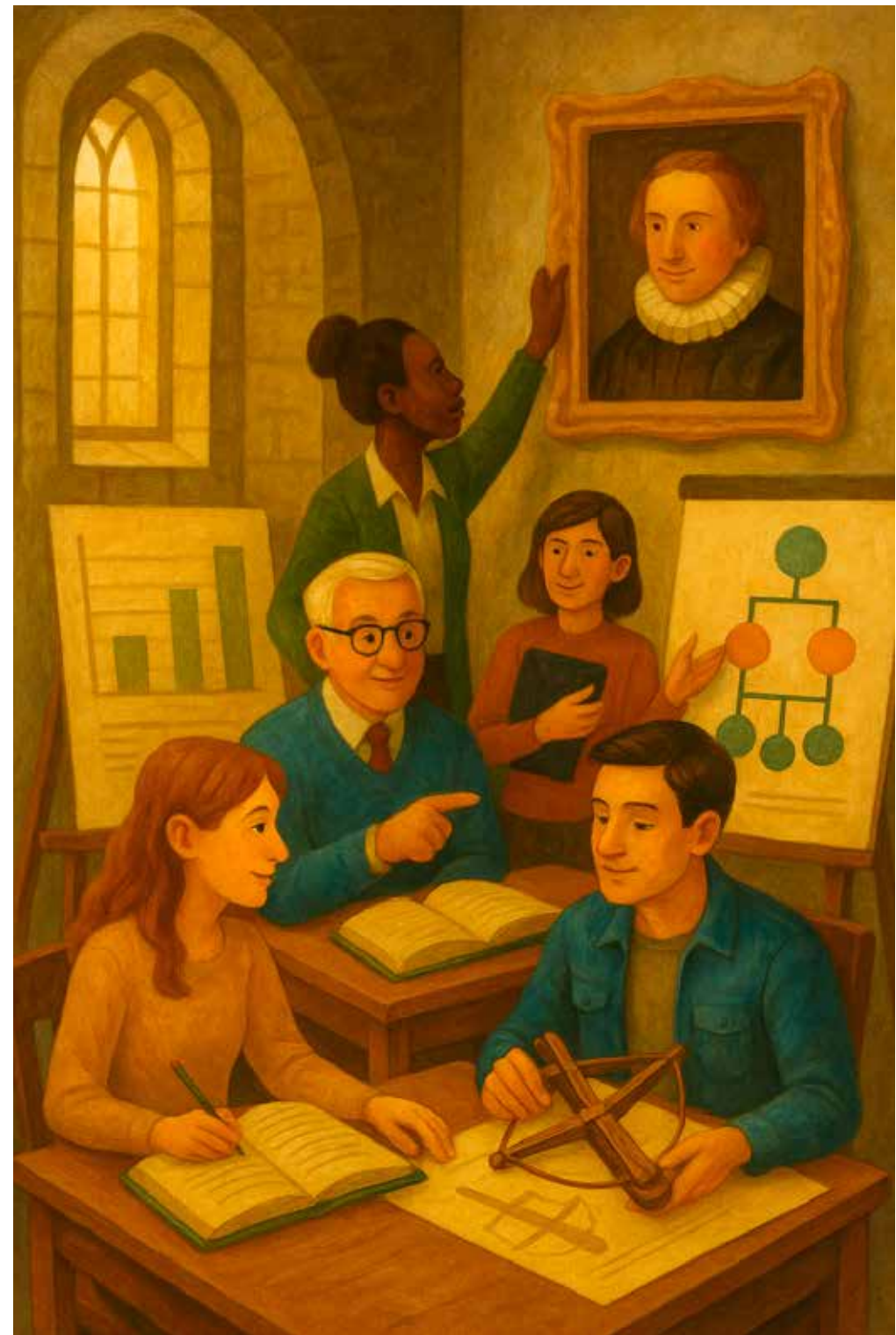
From nature to heritage connection

The work outlined in this report represents a coming together of the two organisations, who had each been increasingly interested in formal exploration into people's sense of relationship with heritage. University of Derby had been collaborating with others on research exploring relationships between heritage connection and wellbeing (Richardson et al., 2025), while the National Trust had independently been exploring the idea of heritage connectedness. Bringing the two together, the National Trust commissioned University of Derby to carry out some qualitative research into heritage connectedness to explore people's experiences of completing a simple heritage connection scale, what the concept of heritage connection meant to them, and what aspects of engagement with heritage might work as pathways to closer sense of connection to heritage (Butler et al., in prep). Combined with the finding that heritage connection matters, this work helped to establish a working definition and framework for heritage connection, and a foundation for further exploring heritage connectedness

"...heritage connectedness significantly predicted wellbeing, including life satisfaction, happiness, personal growth, and reduced depression and anxiety."

as a psychological construct that can be measured, explored, explained and modified.

This report outlines the next step in this process, broadening out the field of enquiry through scoping the literature, engagement with a consortia of heritage professionals to help refine understanding of the concept, and testing an initial heritage connection intervention for feasibility and impact. We summarise some of the headline results and findings and outline a research agenda to carry forward for large-scale exploration and development.



University of Derby's Vice-Chancellor's Partnership Award

In 2024, the University of Derby launched the Vice-Chancellor's Partnership Award to support collaborations between the University and external partners and seed activities that would help the development of new research and impact agendas. One of the awards was given to the Heritage Connection project, which aimed to extend the initial collaborative work of the University of Derby and the National Trust by exploring the novel concept of heritage connectedness, through consortia activity, proof of concept testing, and a bid for ESRC funding.

Aims

- To grow a new cross-sector, cross-disciplinary consortia to discuss and debate the notion of connection to heritage
- To advance theoretical, empirical and practical understandings of heritage connectedness

Overview

NOV – DEC

Project set-up

DEC – APR

Scoping review of research literature and professional practice relating to the concept of heritage connection and wellbeing

FEB – MAR

Three roundtable discussions with heritage professionals exploring the concept, benefits and growth of heritage connectedness.

MAY

Heritage Connection Workshop at Museum of Making in Derby to explore themes and issues in heritage connection

JUN - AUG

Design and testing of a Heritage Connection trail at Calke Abbey as proof-of-concept

SEP – NOV

Development of a research agenda and ESRC funding bid.

Objectives

- 01.** Conduct a scoping review of research and practice related to heritage connection and wellbeing
- 02.** Engage potential users and beneficiaries of heritage connectedness research and practice
- 03.** Identify the perspectives, experiences and needs of stakeholders in the area of heritage connection
- 04.** Facilitate sharing of knowledge, practice, and visions relating to connecting people with heritage.
- 05.** Test the concept of heritage connectedness in a pilot programme
- 06.** Map out a research agenda for heritage connectedness
- 07.** Prepare a high-quality bid for UKRI research funding to accelerate research and impact relating to heritage connectedness



3. Scoping the literature

The concept of heritage connectedness is new, but many of its underlying themes, such as identity, belonging, and relationships to place, the past, and other people are widely explored in existing research. This section summarises our earlier findings introducing the concept, examines themes and insights from related literature, and explores how heritage connection could contribute to the field.

3.1 Introducing heritage connection.

Although the phrase “connecting to heritage” is widely used in the heritage field, there appears to be no prior research treating heritage connection as a measurable, examinable construct other than the work of the authors. The National Trust began exploring the idea of a “heritage connectedness” scale in 2020–21 as part of its

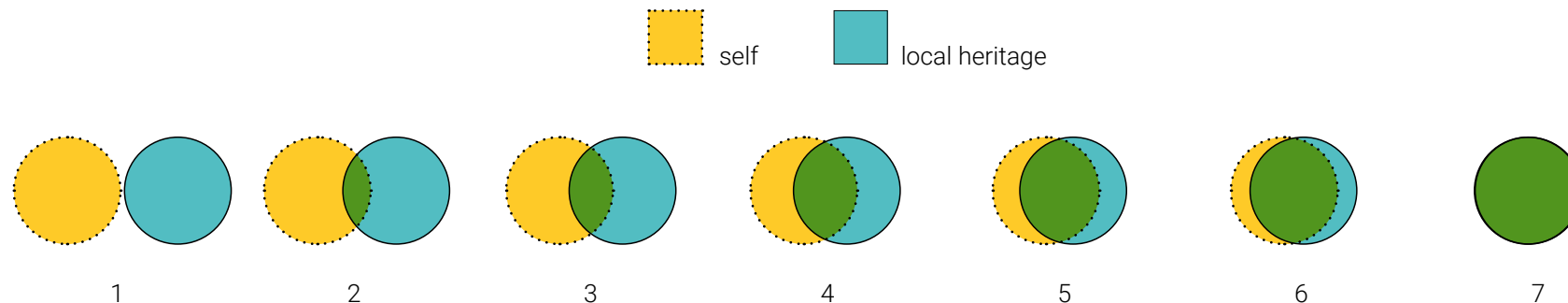
Participatory Archaeology Evaluation Strategy, but this work was not developed further (Wolferston, 2023). The work underpinning this current report includes University of Derby’s research with colleagues from York University and Newcastle University using a simple heritage connection scale, and from a previous collaboration between National Trust and University of Derby exploring understandings and experiences of a connection with heritage.

IN A NUTSHELL

Heritage connectedness is a novel psychological concept describing a person’s subjective sense of relationship with heritage. Experiences of heritage connection are relational, shaped by emotion, imagination, senses, and personal meaning. Our initial research shows heritage connectedness can be measured, and predicts happiness, life satisfaction, and pro-environmental behaviours at similar or better levels than nature or social connectedness.

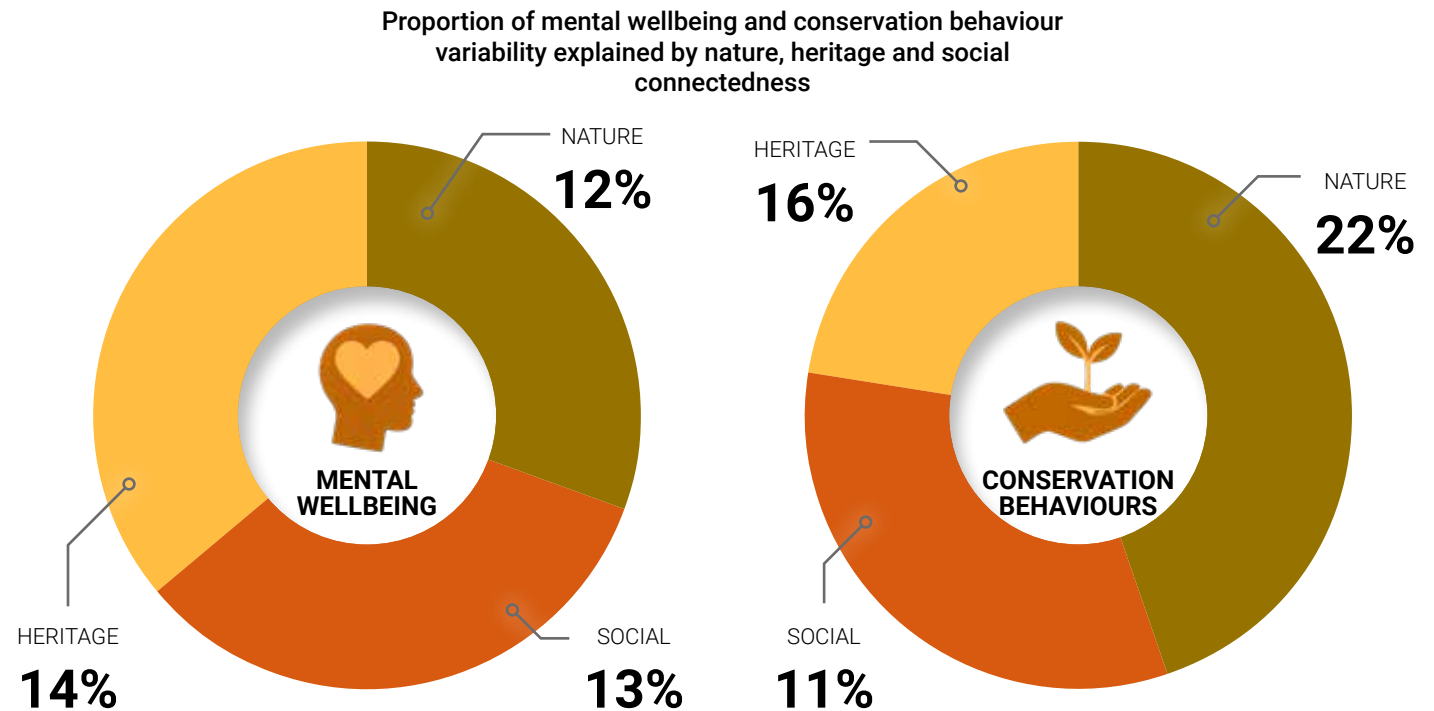
3.1.1 Measuring heritage connectedness

As part of the interdisciplinary Connected Treescapes project, a large-scale survey explored the relationships between connection to local heritage, and wellbeing and environmentalism (Richardson et al., 2025). The survey measured local heritage connectedness using an adapted version of the Inclusion of Self in Other scale (Aron et al., 1992) which invites people to select from one of seven interlocking circles with varying degrees of overlap, which represent relationship of ‘self’ with ‘others’. The scale has previously been adapted to measure nature connectedness with the widely used Inclusion of Nature in Self scale (Schultz, 2002). The ‘Inclusion of Local Heritage in Self’ scale used the same visual format with ‘self’ and ‘local heritage’ labels.



3.1.2 Heritage connectedness and wellbeing

The survey was completed by 1376 participants and compared heritage connectedness with nature and social connectedness for their relationships with wellbeing and environmentalism, taking demographic variables into account. Scores for heritage connectedness were higher than scores for social connectedness, but lower than nature connectedness. Heritage connectedness was found to be a significant predictor of wellbeing, life satisfaction, eudemonic wellbeing, happiness, personal growth, depression, stress, pro-environmentalism and nature conservation behaviours, at levels similar to or better than demographic factors. Furthermore, heritage connectedness was found to be a better predictor of mental wellbeing and conservation behaviours than social connectedness, and outperformed nature connectedness as a predictor of mental wellbeing.



3.1.3 Exploring experiences of heritage connection.

The University of Derby and the National Trust collaborated to further explore what heritage and 'heritage connection' mean to people, and to identify key elements of moments of connection with heritage (Butler et al., in prep). Focus groups were held with 15 National Trust volunteers, and nine interviews conducted with visitors to a Festival of Archaeology event. Findings highlight that heritage connection is a deeply relational and subjective experience. Participants described heritage connectedness as involving three interrelated dimensions: how people think about heritage (cognitive), how they feel toward it (emotional), and how they engage with it (behavioural). Cognitive aspects include knowledge, understanding, and valuing heritage, as well as linking it to identity and meaning. Emotional aspects encompass enjoyment, curiosity, empathy, and personal significance. Behavioural elements include visiting heritage sites, researching history, volunteering, and sharing heritage

with others. Together, these dimensions form a relational and subjective sense of connection that helps people situate themselves in relation to the past, place, and other people.

Moments of strong heritage connection shared by participants often involved encounters with objects, places, or stories that were personally significant and emotionally resonant. These experiences were shaped by sensory engagement—such as sight, touch, and smell—and imagination, which allowed participants to picture historical lives and events. Knowledge frequently acted as a gateway, enabling interpretation and deepening emotional responses. Participants emphasized that heritage connection is not about the mere presence of historic features but about the meanings and feelings they evoke.

Across discussions, several elements emerged as central to heritage connection: emotion, meaning, senses, imagination, and knowledge. These factors interact rather than operate in isolation, creating experiences that are embodied

and affective. A sense of heritage connection occurs "inside people," produced through relationships between individuals and heritage features rather than residing in the features themselves. These findings underscore the importance of designing heritage engagement that fosters emotional and sensory experiences, supports imagination, and provides opportunity for people to create personally meaningful connections.

This work helped establish a working understanding of what heritage connection is as a concept, what it involves, and the key elements of people's experiences of feeling connected with heritage. These insights informed the development of the work outlined in this report. Combined with survey findings showing that heritage connectedness is associated with wellbeing, we now know that heritage connection matters—and we have an initial picture of how it is understood and experienced. This report aims to build on that foundation, identify further questions, and set out a course for advancing the study of heritage connection.

3.2. Themes and insights from related research

We explored key themes and insights from related research on heritage, identity, and connectedness, to build understanding of concepts and processes relevant to heritage connection. As heritage connection is a novel and emerging construct, an exploratory and flexible approach was taken. A large and multi-disciplinary range of topics and concepts are potentially relevant, so a highly selective scoping review was considered more appropriate than a systematic review. The aim was not to produce a definitive or exhaustive synthesis, but to sketch a picture of what is currently known, identify gaps, and assess whether heritage connection is a useful concept and how it might be operationalized.

The review was organized around themes that emerged from earlier research and evolved during this programme of work. This thematic approach allowed us to follow conceptual threads and explore diverse literatures that intersect with heritage connection, rather than applying rigid inclusion criteria. Searches were carried out using Scopus, PsycInfo, Google Scholar, and Google, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracking, and targeted browsing of key journals such as the International Journal of Heritage Studies. This flexible strategy supported the primary goal: to map the landscape of ideas, highlight areas of uncertainty, and inform the development of future research questions and frameworks.

Heritage studies is a multidisciplinary field of study, described by Uzzell (2009) as “the lovechild of a multitude of relationships between academics in many disciplines”. While there are some indications of interdisciplinary approaches, there appears to be scope for greater collaboration and integration of theory and methods. Psychological research on heritage appears to be quite limited and focused on place. Key disciplinary areas include archaeology, cultural and museum studies, tourism, sociology, geography, and history.

3.2.1 Connection to nature, people, humanity, and the wider world

Our work on heritage connection builds on extensive research and practice in nature connection, providing a solid theoretical and methodological foundation for this turn to heritage. Years of research have shaped our understanding of connectedness as a psychological construct and informed approaches for measuring and fostering it. Combined with the National Trust’s decades of experience in connecting people to nature and heritage, this expertise underpins the exploration of heritage connectedness outlined in this report.

Nature connection is about a person’s subjective sense of relationship with the natural world and can be measured and modified. There are cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements to nature connection (Tam 2013; Ives et al., 2019), and clear links with wellbeing and pro-nature attitudes and behaviour (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023; Pritchard et al., 2019). Wellbeing benefits of nature are not simply about physical contact with green and blue spaces, but about people’s psychological engagement and relationship with everyday nature. The five pathways to nature connection – senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion – are ways of relating to and engaging with nature that increase a sense of nature connectedness. (Lumber et al., 2017). These pathways have been widely adopted – including by the National Trust – as a framework for engaging people with nature.

Research on social connectedness is also relevant, referring to a person’s subjective sense of belonging and closeness with other people, based on qualities of relationships rather than quantity. Like nature connectedness, it is associated with improved wellbeing and life satisfaction. The two are related

– nature connection is linked with greater empathy and pro-social behaviour, and those who are more connected with nature often feel more connected to others. These findings suggest that a core thread of connectedness – experiences and perspectives that tie a person to something beyond themselves – is vital for human and planetary wellbeing, shaping people’s relationships with people and with the more-than-human world.

There is increasing attention to relational approaches in the social sciences, reflected in recent work linking broad notions of connectedness to wellbeing. Stinus et al., (2025) extend the notion to social connectedness to consider connectedness to humanity, while Watts et al. (2022) and Merlo et al. (2025) bring together connection to self, others and the wider world at large (including nature) as interrelating dimensions of a holistic sense of connectedness. These more expansive notions of connectedness are associated with mental health, wellbeing, and a deeper sense of meaning and belonging.

Given a growing interest in connectedness as a multidimensional concept, it makes sense to examine the notion of heritage connection more closely. Heritage can encompass relationships with other people, a sense of self, and the wider world, but it also carries a distinctive temporal dimension – a connection to the past and to people who lived before us (and many would argue, to those who will follow). Despite themes such as belonging and feeling part of something larger being common in heritage studies, a sense of heritage connectedness as a measurable psychological state or trait akin to nature or social connectedness has not been explored directly in the literature. Investigating heritage connection as a specific type of connectedness offers an opportunity to deepen understanding of how these heritage experiences contribute to wellbeing and identity.



IN A NUTSHELL

Heritage connection builds on research into nature and social connectedness, which show relational experiences are vital for wellbeing.

Heritage adds a temporal dimension, linking people to past and future

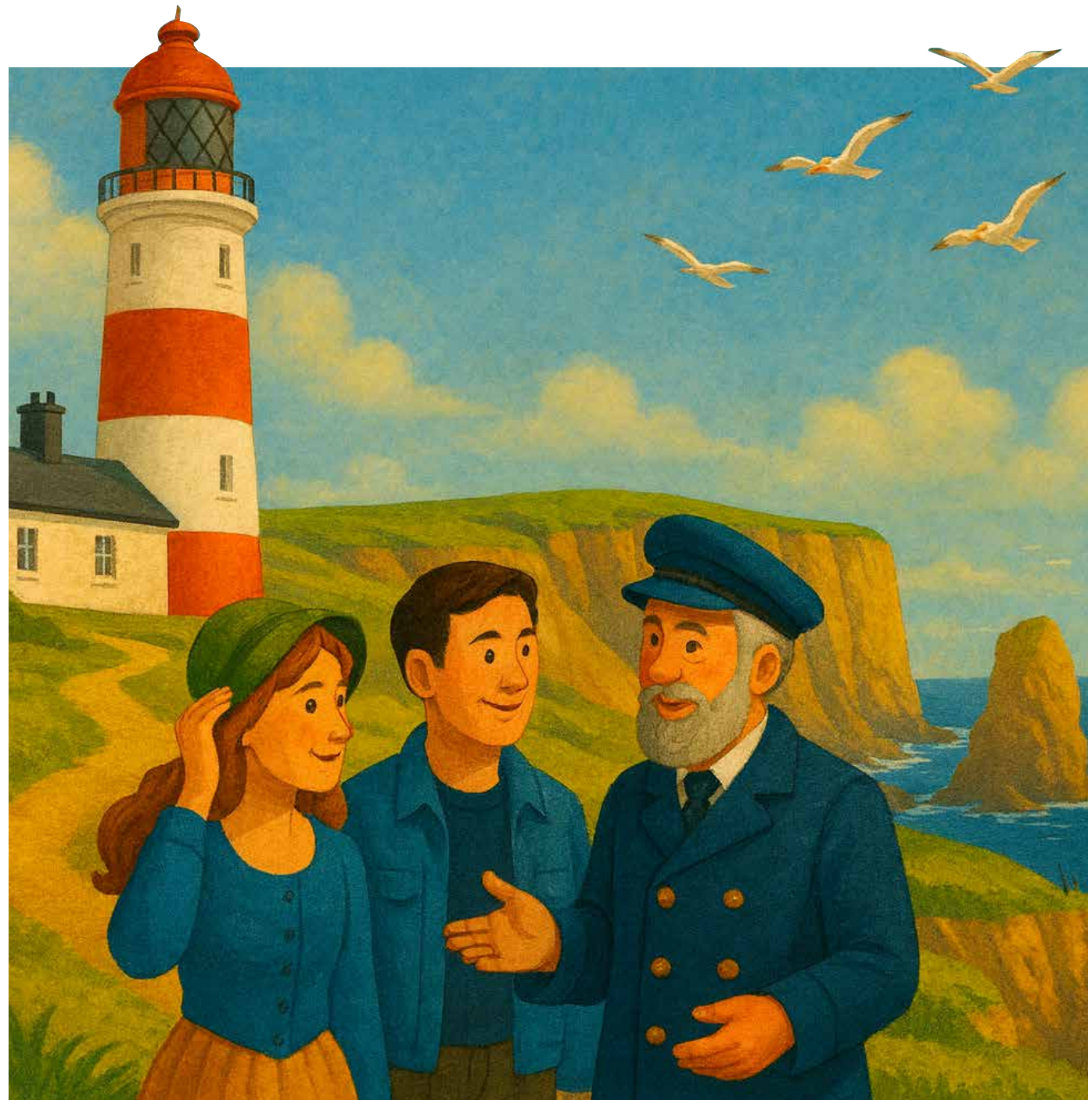
3.2.2 Connecting to heritage.

There are many papers about heritage engagement and benefits that relate to the concept of heritage connectedness. Connecting to the past, and to heritage more generally is often identified as an aim and outcome of heritage projects and interventions (Bundhoo et al., 2025; Burnell & Woodhouse, 2022). A recent paper on archaeotherapy emphasises the importance of connectedness in therapeutic approaches that integrate human and ecological heritage (Sams et al., 2025). Historic objects and landscapes can be or become personally meaningful to people and help shift perspectives. They can support a sense of belonging and of feeling part of something bigger by considering oneself in relation to the past and past people. Nolan (2019a) suggests that interactions with prehistoric landscapes and objects can nurture 'existential relatedness' (Ai et al., 2012), or a deep sense of interconnectedness with a common humanity and

The concept of heritage connection can help to capture and consolidate research that explores how heritage fosters a sense of identity, belonging, and meaning in life.

'primordial community of being' (p. 48). Similarly, heritage is described as offering ontological security (Grenville, 2007) – a sense of stability and continuity that comes from feeling rooted in the past, and situated within deep time (Nolan, 2019b; Sofear et al., 2021).

More generally, literature across disciplines frequently refers to people experiencing feelings of belonging, groundedness, and a part of something larger through heritage engagement. These subjective thoughts and emotions appear to be fundamental elements of a broader concept of connectedness, which situates a person in relation to other times, places, and people. The psychological construct of heritage connectedness could help to capture and explore the subjective sense of feeling connected with heritage, opening up new avenues for theory and research.



3.2.3 Heritage and Place

Literature on place attachment, and the closely allied concept of a 'sense of place' is vast and complex, but a key theme in work exploring people's relationship to heritage. While place attachment is a core concept within environmental psychology and historic features are found to be important to a sense of place and to people's attachment to place, psychological research has paid relatively little attention to historic places (Wang, 2023). Most of the work on heritage and place comes from heritage and tourism studies.

Place attachment refers to a subjective sense of an emotional bond with a place, with emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimension, including place identity (connection between a place and a person's sense of who they are) and place dependence (functional attachments to a place) (Lewicka, 2011). A 'sense of place' is a broader concept that refers to shared cultural meanings and collective identities associated with a place, based on its unique qualities and characteristics (Tuan, 1979). Heritage contributes to a sense of place, through both built and cultural heritage features that help individuals and communities 'place themselves in the past and present' (Hawke, 2011). A new concept of 'land-connectedness' (Macmillan, nd) has been proposed to bring together connection to nature and culture and deep time to establish a unique 'sense of place'.

A recent study explored what people in Coventry knew and cared about regarding local history and heritage, and how this related to pride in place (Public First, 2025). Local heritage was highly valued and seen as making Coventry a good place to live. People with greater awareness of local history and heritage were more likely express pride in place. Findings showed that heritage was more associated with tangible historical buildings and features, which were ranked more highly than intangible heritage such as stories and traditions. Those who felt more connected to heritage, as measured with the Inclusion of Local Heritage in Self scale (Richardson et al., 2025) were more likely to report pride in place, optimism about its future, and willingness to defend it against criticism. This suggests that people's sense of relationship with heritage – the extent to which heritage is considered a part of themselves – is linked to care for place, with implications for conservation and stewardship.

While people in Coventry expressed a strong appreciation of tangible heritage, research on heritage and place suggests that bonds with heritage places are not simply based on the presence or evaluations of historic assets. Rather, they are part of a deeper relationship to place, tied to a sense of self, emotional responses and shared cultural meanings. This highlights the potential value of measuring heritage connection as a distinct construct, to capture these relational and experiential dimensions beyond traditional notions of place attachment or sense of place.

This broader perspective is supported by recent psychological research showing that experiences of historic places involve cognitive, affective and behavioural processes. For example, Ries and Schwan (2023) suggest historic places engage historical imagination, reasoning, and feelings of authenticity, awe, and belonging. The place contributes to a sense of identity and shapes how people situate themselves relative to the past and broader cultural narratives. Similarly, in a qualitative study based on interviews with people in Edinburgh, Wang (2023) explored aspects of attachment to historic places that go beyond their physical or historical attributes, focusing on social and personal connections. These included attachments rooted in current, past, or ancestral everyday life, as well as autobiographical associations with a place. Such personal bonds were often reinforced through imagination and a sense of "time travel,"

IN A NUTSHELL

Heritage is associated with people's emotional attachments to place, sense of place, and pride in place. A subjective sense of connection to heritage may underpin, or strengthen, these relationships, which are more based on how people think and feel about place than historic assets. Heritage connection can extend enquiry into emotional attachments to heritage, beyond place.

where individuals mentally transport themselves from the present to the past, evoking a range of emotional responses.

Madgin (2021) explored the emotional attachments people form to the 'personalities of historic urban places', which go beyond architecture and history to include the feel and experience of a place, and its rhythms and stories. People's sense of relationship with historic urban places was explored with the concept of emotional communities, linking ways of engaging with heritage with ways of feeling about it. The emotional impact of meaningful places (National Trust, 2017) and social relationships in place play a key role in explaining a link between built heritage and wellbeing (Sektani et al., 2022). Research on heritage and place has emphasised that it is not primarily the physicality of place that matters to people, so much as how they feel and think about historic places, and the relations with past, place, and

people they nurture. The concept of heritage connectedness offers a way to explore and measure the relational dimensions of historic and heritage places, incorporating emotional, cognitive, and behavioural elements. Heritage connection has clear overlaps with the concepts of a sense of place and place attachment but provides for an extension beyond these for a more holistic sense of heritage. This includes dimensions of heritage relationships less tied to place, such as connections to heritage objects, stories, cultural practices and traditions, and geographically dispersed heritage entities.



3.2.4 Heritage and Wellbeing

There is a steadily growing body of research and evaluation on the links between heritage and wellbeing. Useful summaries of the research include Historic England's Wellbeing and the Historic Environment report (Reilly et al., 2018) and their updated Evidence Enquiry for Wellbeing and Heritage (Bundhoo et al., 2025). Historic England's Framework for Wellbeing and Heritage (Reilly et al., 2018) identifies six key themes of the relationship between heritage and wellbeing: Heritage as Process, Participation, Mechanism, Healing, Place and Environment.

An edited book on historic landscapes and mental wellbeing (Darvill et al., 2019) brings together a rich and varied collection of work associated with the Human Henge project and related initiatives. A scoping review commissioned by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing focuses on the impact of historic places, assets and interventions on community wellbeing (Pennington et al., 2018). Gallou's (2022) review categorises research on wellbeing benefits in relation to types of engagement with historic places. A realist review of heritage interventions focuses on exploring what types of interventions work for which people, in which context and why (Burnell & Woodhouse, 2022). A recent systematic review and meta-synthesis evaluates qualitative research to explore the impact and mechanisms of heritage environment interventions on mental health (Li et al., 2025).

The reviews describe and discuss the established links between heritage and wellbeing, the range of wellbeing outcomes observed, types of heritage and heritage engagement associated with wellbeing, and mechanisms and processes for the wellbeing-heritage relationship. However, many also acknowledge the complexities of research in this area (see Bundhoo et al., 2025 for a useful discussion of these). Disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical heterogeneity, combined with various dimensions and measurements of heritage and wellbeing, make synthesis and comparison challenging. What counts as 'heritage' can include visitor attractions or heritage site, heritage buildings or monuments, historic objects, heritage cities or landscapes, or heritage activities. Engagement

can include mere proximity or contact, handling objects, exploring museums, taking part in heritage conservation or discovery, or being involved in a therapeutic heritage intervention. Challenges are faced in both isolating and disentangling these different elements, and in drawing generalised conclusions.

Wellbeing Benefits of Heritage

(From Bundhoo et al., 2025, p2)

- **Psychological and Mental Health Benefits – Reduced stress, anxiety, and depression through immersive engagement with heritage sites, cultural landscapes, and community history.**
- **Social Wellbeing and Community Cohesion – Strengthened social bonds, intergenerational exchange, and increased civic participation, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable groups.**
- **Cultural Identity and Ontological Security – A sense of continuity and stability in a rapidly changing world, particularly in areas with contested histories or shifting demographics.**
- **Physical Wellbeing – Increased outdoor activity, mobility, and physical engagement through interaction with heritage-rich landscapes and green spaces.**
- **Economic and Regenerative Benefits – Heritage-led regeneration projects contribute to place-making and sustainable tourism, fostering economic prosperity alongside social wellbeing.**

Individual wellbeing benefits have been explored in relation to living near (e.g. Macdonald et al., 2023) or visiting heritage sites (e.g. Gallou et al., 2022; Sofear et al., 2021; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2019) through to interventions with

a specific health or wellbeing purpose, such as museum object handling in hospital settings (e.g. Thompson et al., 2018) or 'culture therapy' in the ancient landscapes of Stonehenge and Avebury (Darvill et al., 2019). The growing body of research showing the impact of heritage activities on mental health (e.g. Heaslip et al., 2020) and social isolation (e.g. Historic England, 2025), contribute to the approximately £8 billion per year worth of improvements in people's quality of life and higher productivity attributed to culture and heritage engagement (DCMS, 2024). Heritage is embedded into social prescribing initiatives, supported by a new toolkit produced by NASP and Historic England (see Mughal et al., 2022).

Wellbeing is typically categorised as comprised of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, which can be crudely described as 'feeling good' and 'functioning well'. Hedonic wellbeing is associated with feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life (Ng, 2025). Eudaimonic wellbeing involves having a sense of purpose and meaning in life, self-acceptance and positive relationships (Ryff, 2014). Heritage is associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, though this depends on the nature of engagement. For example, visiting sites linked to contested, difficult or trauma-linked heritage (e.g. sites associated with war or slavery) may not evoke positive emotions, yet can prompt reflection on life's meaning and purpose (Sofear et al., 2021). Other heritage experiences may be more hedonic in nature but offer fewer opportunities to engage in meaning-making.

Hedonic experiences at heritage sites can include feelings of comfort and pleasure, which can result from sensory, affective, physical and social engagement (Ateca-Amestoy et al., 2021; Bender et al., 2022; Gallou et al., 2022). In a study of visiting heritage sites after Covid-19, Gallou et al (2022) found improved hedonic wellbeing, associated with feelings of relaxation and stress reduction. Interestingly, feelings related to ontological security and life purpose – elements of eudaimonic wellbeing – were not a significant predictor of wellbeing. This contrasts with qualitative data from the same project, in which people talked about enhanced sense of meaning,

social connectedness and belonging, ontological security, and trust (Sofear et al., 2021). These elements of eudaimonic wellbeing, along with issues of identity, groundedness and connectedness are widely found to be integral to people's experiences and engagement with heritage. Heritage helps people feel anchored in time and place, offering a sense of rootedness and belonging that is key for identity (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003). Gallou et al. (2022) suggest that current evaluation tools are limited in their capacity to measure the eudaimonic impacts of heritage. Measures of heritage connectedness may be particularly useful for capturing eudaimonic wellbeing, given that the construct involves a sense of belonging and meaning.

Evidence of wellbeing benefits comes from both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and increasing use of mixed methods. In comparison with studies of nature-based interventions, there are fewer pre-post design studies evidencing the impact of heritage intervention – particularly long-term effects. One exception is evaluation of the Human Henge project offering immersive experiences in the prehistoric landscapes of Stonehenge and Avebury for people with mental health issues (Heaslip et al, 2020). Ten half-day sessions involved a mix of activities including walking, object handling, singing, arts and crafts, and storytelling, supporting connection with past, with data collected before, during, after, and one-year after the intervention. Wellbeing significantly improved from baseline during, after, and one year post intervention. Wider use of follow-up data would enable comparative studies, making

IN A NUTSHELL

There are evidenced links between heritage and wellbeing, showing that heritage visits and engagement can benefit mental health and wellbeing, physical health, sense of identity, social wellbeing and community cohesion. Heritage connection may help measure the deeper, eudaimonic, impacts of heritage, offering potential for systemic evaluation and new ways to approach measures of the value of heritage in culture and heritage capital approaches.

it possible to identify which elements of an intervention create lasting benefits. Measuring heritage connection before, during and after would also allow for evaluation of a lasting sense of connection to the past.

The social wellbeing impacts of heritage include both individual and community benefits. Mak et al. (2023) found that historic urban environments in the UK were associated with greater social capital, with people living in areas with more heritage assets reporting more trust, cooperation, social support networks and personal relationships. A large-scale survey in Nara City in Japan found social cohesion was associated with heritage awareness and engagement (Li et al., 2024). This suggests that it is not just the presence of heritage that matters, but the extent to which people notice and engage with it – further support for the potential of a 'heritage connection' construct to mediate associations between heritage

assets and wellbeing.

Heritage interventions can also boost social wellbeing, for example increased sociability was found among mental health and addiction recovery service users after taking part in a creative museum outreach intervention (Morse et al., 2015). At a community level, heritage assets often function as important social spaces. Cultural heritage has been identified as a mobilising factor in linking different groups within a community to create social capital (Beel & Wallace, 2023). More broadly, heritage helps contribute to collective pride in place (Public First, 2025), nurture shared identities, and strengthen community cohesion (Brizi et al., 2023). However, this area of research is underexplored.

Identifying the mechanisms by which heritage benefits wellbeing is difficult given the issues noted above, with the breadth and diversity of research and methodologies. In a rich review of the literature, Gallou (2022) proposes three pathways between heritage and wellbeing - identity, experience, and capabilities – and emphasises the importance of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural links people form with heritage in personal and community wellbeing. A sense of connection with heritage that goes beyond the simple presence of historic elements to incorporate subjective qualities helps people make sense of who they are relative to the past, place, and other people. Integrating the concept of heritage connection into wellbeing frameworks and evaluations would enable more systematic research, clearer outcome measures, and deeper understandings of both the mechanisms and impacts of heritage on wellbeing.

More broadly, heritage connection could inform methodologies for Culture and Heritage Capital valuation approaches, offering a novel metric for valuing heritage across the whole suite of heritage 'services' (i.e. aesthetic, authenticity, communal, inspirational, identity, knowledge, health and environmental) (DCMS, 2024). Heritage connectedness can help measure both use and non-use values, and be particularly useful in capturing feelings of belonging, attachment, nostalgia, identity, and pride. This would help fill anticipated gaps and offer new ways of articulating heritage value.



3.2.5 Heritage Engagement

While there is a large body of work exploring the benefits of heritage, less is known about the processes through which these benefits arise. Research on heritage engagement identifies a range of experiential elements that matter to people, whether because they contribute to measurable benefits or because they are integral to how individuals interact with, respond to, or value heritage. Heritage experiences are multidimensional, and can involve learning and knowledge, senses, emotions, aesthetics, physical activity, imagination and meaning-making. Survey and experimental research has identified general types of heritage engagement that are associated with benefits (e.g. volunteering, object handling or creative heritage activities), while qualitative research has shed light on subjective experiences. Much of the literature in this area focuses on visitor experiences, particularly within tourism and museum contexts.

Heritage engagement can be active or passive. Passive engagement can include simply living in heritage spaces, visiting sites or observing (e.g. going to a museum or living in a historic city or landscape), whereas active engagement involves participation, creation, or other forms of immersion (e.g. volunteering, handling objects, taking part in an archaeological dig or therapeutic heritage activity). Research on nature connection can offer a useful point of comparison, showing that active rather than passive engagement with nature is important for nature connection and wellbeing benefits (Richardson et al., 2021). While simple contact with nature has benefits, actively noticing, appreciating, and engaging with nature has a much greater impact on wellbeing and helps foster deeper connections with nature. Similarly, while living near or visiting heritage sites appear to be associated with wellbeing outcomes, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement is key to the expression and strength of such outcomes (Aceta-Amestoy et al., 2021; Gallou, 2022; Macdonald et al., 2023). Connection, rather than contact, is what matters.

Sensory experiences support emotional and meaningful engagement with heritage. Most research in this area has focused on tourism heritage experiences, along with

increasing interest in sensory experience in museums, particularly in relation to the creation of digital and immersive experiences (e.g. Guo et al., 2021). Across fields, the emphasis has been on visual and auditory senses, with limited consideration of tactile and olfactory senses, or of heritage as a multisensory experience (Bender et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2024). Recent research has explored the 'smellscape' of heritage urban areas (Lindborg et al., 2025), which may be particularly important given smell's capacity to evoke emotions and nostalgic memory (Green et al., 2023). Sensory engagement with heritage can support the design of therapeutic heritage, such as in the 'Sensory Palaces' programme at Hampton Court and Kew Palaces for people living with dementia (Innes et al., 2018).

Affect and emotion are core aspects of heritage experience and practice (Smith, 2006). While wellbeing research often frames emotions as hedonic outcomes (i.e. subjective feelings of pleasure or calm), the practice of heritage engagement demonstrates that emotion is integral to the experience itself. Affect is a social practice through which meaning is created, and how people make sense of the past (Wetherell et al., 2018). Heritage experiences and performances are constituted through a range of emotions - nostalgia, grief, awe, pride, empathy, anger, joy and more - which shape how people explore why heritage matters to them and others across time (Smith, 2020). Emotional engagement is interwoven with cognitive and interpretive processes. Studies have observed that learning about historical events and people in museums is an emotional experience, supported through engagement with stories, artefacts and different perspectives which can help foster historical empathy (e.g. Savenije & Bruijn, 2017; Schorch, 2012).

Research has explored the relational and embodied dimensions of affect. For example, in a study exploring both subjective and physiological affective data, Hoare (2020) noted the relational aspects of affect - emotional responses were shaped by visitors' ability to identify with the 'Lady' versus the 'Maid'. Ethnographic research at National Trust sites showed how sensory and emotional

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Heritage experiences are multidimensional, involving physical, psychological, and social elements. Engagement with heritage ranges from passive to active, consumptive to participatory, and shallow to deep. Experiences built from sensory, emotional and meaningful engagement - involving imagination, awe and wonder, storytelling, and reflection - seem most likely to foster a sense of heritage connection.

engagement nurtured a sense of belonging and connection to the past, often through memory and imagination (Cope, 2014). Similarly, Wang (2023) described how imagination helped people 'time travel' to connect past with the present. Archaeological engagement can help foster 'archaeological imagination,' (Shanks, 2012) - creative and emotional thought processes that can help develop a 'habit of mind' that can fundamentally change how people see the world and their place in it (Hearne, 2018). Perry (2019) describes archaeology as a source of enchantment - bringing feelings of wonder, attachment and community that can inspire care for others and the world at large (Bennett, 2001). From the perspective of heritage as action, it could also be argued that archaeology is the product of enchantment. Immersive approaches to heritage engagement can embed enchantment through emotive storytelling (Gilchrist et al., 2025).

Growing recognition of heritage as experiential, sensory and affective underpins a shift away from information- and material-centric approaches toward models that prioritise emotional engagement and active participation in the creation of personally meaningful experiences (Bender et al., 2022; Tolia-Kelly et al., 2017). While these aspects of heritage engagement remain underexplored in the literature - particularly in relation to everyday heritage (Ireland et al., 2024) - further research can advance understanding of what forms of engagement foster heritage connectedness and wellbeing. A heritage connection framework can also advance understanding of the constitutive elements of heritage - a sense of connection is not just what people might take from heritage, but what they bring to it, ultimately shaping what heritage is.



“Heritage helps people feel anchored in time and place, offering a sense of rootedness and belonging that is key for identity.”

3.3 Conclusions

Our earlier work introduced heritage connection as a subjective sense of relationship with heritage, shaped by how people think about, feel toward, and engage with heritage, and linked to wellbeing. The scoping review suggests that while themes central to heritage connection, such as identity, belonging, and relationships with place are widely discussed, they remain fragmented across disciplines and have not been formalized as a single construct.

Insights from multidisciplinary studies of place, wellbeing, and engagement offer important contributions to developing the concept of heritage connection, point to future research directions, and identify how heritage connection could contribute to the field.

- Heritage connection provides a way to explore relationships with heritage that are not constrained by physical location, while also helping to understand relationship with heritage places. Literature shows that what people think and feel about a place is key to pride and wellbeing, and heritage connection can frame this relational dimension.
- Heritage connection appears particularly useful for understanding and measuring eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing such as belonging, purpose, and meaning that current tools struggle to capture. This could inform systematic research, evaluation frameworks, and Culture and Heritage Capital methodologies.
- Heritage connection offers a focus for examining the processes and practices of heritage experiences, identifying which forms of engagement foster stronger connection and greater wellbeing, and how a sense of connection can shape engagement.

The scoping review reinforces the value of heritage connection as a concept that can integrate dispersed ideas, provide conceptual clarity, and support systematic research on a relational approach to heritage that matters for identity, belonging, and wellbeing. As well as advancing interdisciplinary knowledge and methodologies, heritage connection has important practical potential in developing heritage experiences, outcome measures, valuation methodologies, and policies for thriving places, people and communities.

4. Sounding the field: Heritage Connection Roundtables and Workshop



Heritage professionals are immersed in the conceptual and practical issues relevant to the concept of heritage connection – through academic research, management of heritage sites and spaces, community and visitor engagement, heritage discovery and conservation, or the development of heritage and culture policy and strategy. Alongside professional and specialised expertise in the field of heritage, many have insights grown from years of engagement and enquiry with the public about the promises, opportunities and challenges around connecting people with heritage.

We wanted to facilitate opportunities for heritage professionals to come together to explore what heritage connection is, why it matters and how it could be supported. To this end, we hosted a series of online heritage connection roundtables, and an in-person event, inviting individuals representing a range of perspectives and fields with interest and expertise in people's relationship with heritage.

Heritage Connection Roundtables

A set of three online roundtables were hosted, bringing together a total of 30 people from across 27 organisations, representing academia, government, and a range of charities and professional bodies across the heritage and environmental sectors.

There were between 7 and 12 people in each session and two facilitators. The sessions were organised around four key questions, with participants invited to share their responses to each question verbally, and to add comments and links to a Padlet and the chat space on Teams.

- 1. What does a 'connection with heritage' mean to you?**
- 2. Why does heritage matter to people?**
- 3. How connected are people to heritage, in the UK?**
- 4. What would improve people's relationships**



Heritage connection involves

- A SENSE OF belonging and being a part of something bigger than oneself – in relation to place, people and time.
- A FEELING OF groundedness in place offering A SENSE OF stability
- relational identity – A SENSE OF who you are in relation to time, place and other people.
- AWARENESS OF continuity between past, present and future
- NOTICING AND APPRECIATING the heritage status of ordinary places and materials
- UNDERSTANDINGS THAT LEAD to meaningful and emotional connections to heritage
- SENSORY ENGAGEMENT WITH heritage places and objects as a route to connectedness

"a really deep sense of kind of rootedness and connection and sense of place with this city that I happened to find myself living in."

"connecting the past to the future and recognizing we are somewhere along that timeline".

"...learning from the past and how people dealt with issues before them and seeing the bigger picture; feeling they are part of something bigger and how they and their life contributes to the heritage of a community and place"

"We have walks that are looking at the drains on our pavement and all of that is part of our heritage, and those everyday pieces of heritage really connect with people and get people inspired."

"I spent last week going round castles in Wales because they're pretty and I like castles, and I think that's okay. And that is a level of connection - a visual appreciation that brings me emotional joy."

".. being able to be in the place where something once happened, or touch an artefact from the past, is an incredibly powerful phenomenon"

"...people can see their heritage (or local heritage that they can respond to) on a daily basis, acknowledge it regularly and informally, it becomes part of life."



Heritage offers

- Individual wellbeing ● Social connectedness ● Pride in place
- Community cohesion ● Functional spaces for communities ● Heritage contact or connection ● Diverse and unequal experiences and perceptions

"[heritage can] articulate a narrative of a community and can be a catalyst for connection between each other"

"When we say the word heritage, it is always worth checking in with people, what do you understand by that term, and is it a good or a bad thing?"



"[The church] is the thing that brings people together and it provides the centre to the village, it provides the kind of community cohesion (...) it's the way you meet people and it's the way people connect."

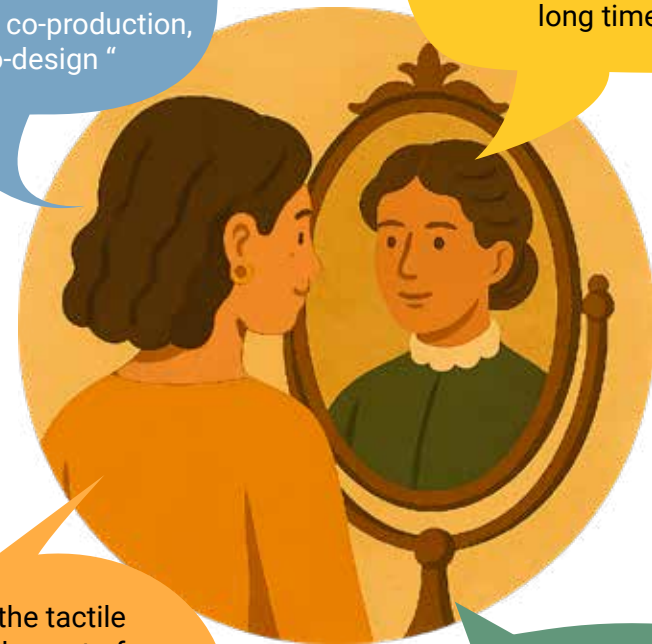
"It can also - crucially - help us to understand who other people are and why they're the way they are ... in that respect it can be really important to community relations and cohesion."

Deepening heritage connectedness

- Meaningful and emotional engagement with everyday heritage.
- Exploring relations between people, past and place ● Storytelling
- 'De-expertifying' heritage ● Community ownership and co-production
- Diversity of thought

"making sure that people have that sense of (..) ownership, that sense of control, (...) that they feel that greater connection through that co-production, that co-design"

"It is really about storytelling, I think that is definitely the way, making people realise that they are connected in this massive, long story and it's not just something that happened a long time ago."



"the tactile element of connections with heritage can act as a lightning rod to channel strong feelings of connectedness"

"incorporating democratic decision making into heritage – what is of value and how it is experienced or visited."



Heritage Connection Workshop

12th May 2025

Museum of Making, Derby Silk Mill

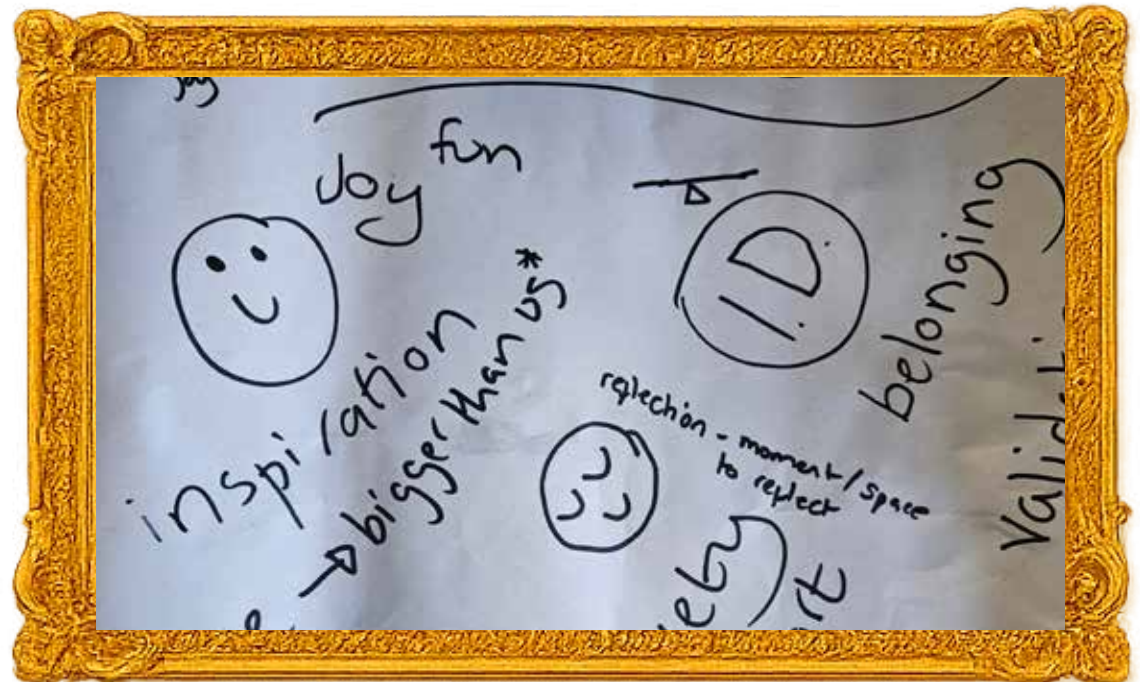
The Heritage Connection Workshop brought together over 30 professionals from heritage, museum, research and creative sectors to explore the concept of heritage connectedness.

Presentations:

Miles Richardson, Professor of Nature Connectedness and Human Factors at University of Derby introduced the day and the context for the Vice-Chancellor's Partnership Award, developing research on nature connectedness to explore heritage connection.

Tom Dommett, Head of Historic Environment at the National Trust presented on 'A Relational Approach to Engagement in the National Trust', describing a shift from access and information to a new strategy that aims to help "More people... feel connected to nature and their cultural heritage"

Tony Butler, Director of Derby Museums' presentation 'Making Connections' shared how the Museum of Making connects communities with each other, heritage and the natural world.



With facilitation from Kelly Herrick and Katapult, we took a heart, head and hands approach to explore what heritage connection feels like, what questions we have about heritage connection, and how we might grow people's sense of connection with heritage.

HEART: Exploring Emotional Connections to Heritage

What emotionally connects us to heritage?

An emotional spectrum:

Positive: joy, fun, inspiration, awe, nostalgia, comfort, belonging, identity, gratitude, sense of safety, empathy for people in the past.

Negative: unsettling, intimidating, alienating, divisive.

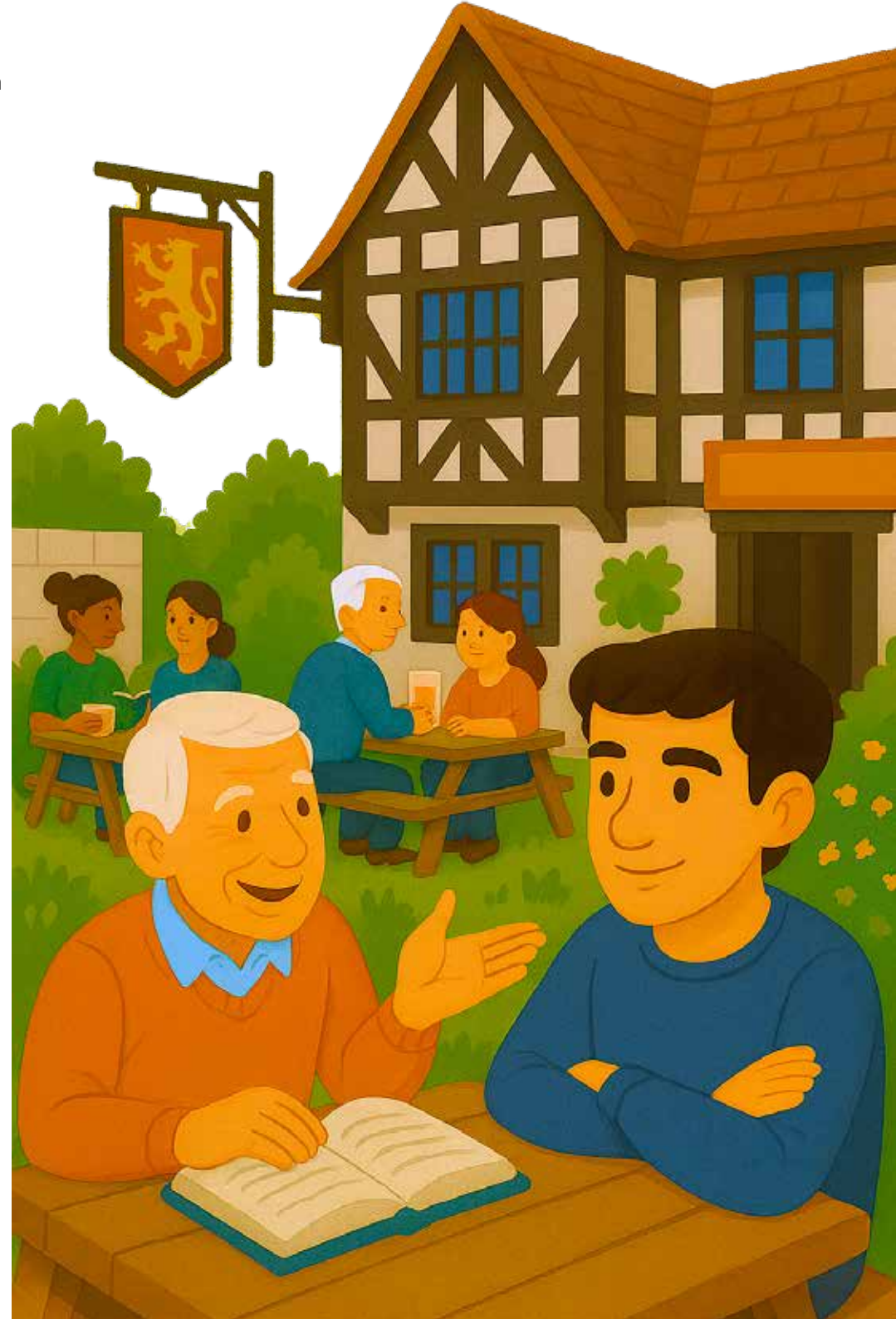
Everyday cues: Visual reminders of heritage in daily life can help connect us – photos and ornaments on a mantelpiece, or a pub in a historic building, or local church.

Connection drivers:

- Memory and experience
- Cultural inheritance
- Spirituality
- Craft and skill
- Storytelling
- Shared healing
- Opportunities for reflection
- Physical and psychological access to heritage

How Might We Grow Deeper Connections with Heritage?

- Shift from facts and figures to feelings, through storytelling, imagination, play, sensory and emotional experiences.
- Support inclusive physical and psychological access to heritage
- Move from a “spotlight” to a “kaleidoscope” view of heritage.
- Empower communities through citizen assemblies, co-curation and shared ownership, volunteering opportunities.
- Encourage noticing and celebration of everyday heritage - in offices, homes, walking routes, high streets and through football, popular culture, and lived traditions.
- Find creative entry points for those disconnected with heritage.
- Position heritage as a catalyst for community and economic growth.
- The word heritage is contested and unclear – consider other words.



HEAD: Exploring current issues and questions about heritage connection

Access and Opportunity

- Heritage engagement and opportunities for connection are unequal - barriers include transport, time, cost, and the availability of local everyday heritage.
- Nature is seen as “everywhere” - heritage is still viewed as a destination, not an everyday presence.

Structural and Cultural Challenges

- Heritage management is often asset-led, shaped by institutional priorities rather than public interest and community values.
- Grassroots archaeology struggles with funding and resources, and attracting diverse groups.
- Funding for engagement is often easiest to cut – loss of skills and workforce to support heritage connection despite strategic objectives for public benefit
- Lack of heritage literacy

Recognition and Value

- The social and wellbeing benefits of heritage need more recognition
- The value of heritage is often only realised when it is under threat.
- Heritage is not always seen for its connecting potential and can be used to divide instead

What do we want to know about heritage connectedness?

Understanding Connection

- Do people feel connected to heritage?
- What does heritage connection mean, feel like, and look like to people?
- What forms of engagement boost heritage connection?
- What is the difference between place connectedness and heritage connectedness?
- How can heritage connection be measured?

Community Perspectives

- What do people want from heritage?
- What words resonate with people - should we rethink terminology?
- What are the real and perceived heritage assets in communities?
- How can communities be supported to notice and engage with everyday and non-traditional heritage?
- What is the social value of heritage connectedness?

Heritage Practice

- Who benefits from understanding heritage connectedness - professionals, communities, policymakers?
- What skills and support do heritage organisations need to serve communities better?
- How can heritage connection be supported for different individuals and groups?
- How can heritage organisations prioritise community perspectives and concerns?



HANDS: Growing heritage connectedness

Education and Learning

- Develop a new education framework based on curiosity, experience and discussion rather than facts and assessment, with more learning outside the classroom.
- Create heritage pathways and awards for young people
- Integrate heritage and nature literacy to prepare future generations to be proactive.

Community and Participation

- Promote volunteering and community participation.
- Support community networks for knowledge exchange and collaboration.
- Encourage co-creation and rebalance power from experts to communities.

Campaigns and Awareness

- Local and national campaigns and calls to action.
- Increase media awareness to make heritage connection visible and relatable.
- Raise awareness of how heritage and nature go together



Learn from and integrate best practice and existing structures

Examples include Heritage Open Days, Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance, Creative Health Quality Framework, Derby Museums Human-Centred Design Framework, Heritage Alliance Heritage and Wellbeing Report, Nature Connection Framework, Social Impact Framework, Heritage Index, Social Prescribing

New resources and approaches

- Heritage Connection Framework integrating people, place, power, nature, heritage.
- Evaluation tools to measure improved heritage connection.
- Heritage Connection toolkit.
- Embed heritage connection in health and wellbeing policy agendas

Key Principles

- Indirect approach: Don't force connection - create opportunities.
- Not one-size-fits-all: Tailor approaches to different communities and places.
- Interpretation matters: Use playfulness, storytelling, imagination, and technology to create positive connecting experiences.

IN A NUTSHELL

1 Heritage connection is emotional, relational, and everyday

It involves a sense of belonging, joy, and awe but may also involve discomfort and exclusion. It can bring cohesion or division. Connection doesn't just happen in heritage sites but in everyday objects, places, and traditions.

2 Access, equity, and language are barriers to heritage connection

Opportunities for heritage connection are uneven and there are structural and cultural

challenges. The term 'heritage' may be a barrier – we need to find out how people understand it and how to frame heritage in inclusive and relevant ways.

3 Storytelling, creativity, and co-creation are key

Moving from facts to feelings, using imagination, play, and community-led approaches can foster deeper heritage connections. Empowering communities through ownership and collaboration will support heritage connection that matters.

4 Research is needed to understand and grow heritage connectedness

We need to find out what heritage connection means, feels and looks like to people and identify approaches that nurture a sense of connection with heritage. Research needs to consider diversity, equity, wellbeing, and be impactful.

5 Systemic change and collaboration are needed

Heritage matters across sectors and policy areas, requiring systemic change across

education, health and wellbeing, policy, environment and place. Heritage should be positioned as a public good linked to health, sustainability, and social value.

6 Frameworks and campaigns can shape and support impact

A heritage connection framework, evaluation tools, and campaigns, growing from and integrated with other heritage and nature initiatives, can help embed heritage connectedness in practice, policy and communities.

5. Boosting Heritage Connectedness: Testing a Heritage Connection Trail

Initial research into experiences of heritage connection with National Trust volunteers, and previous work on boosting nature connectedness, was used as the basis for developing a set of engagement activities that could potentially help connect people with a sense of time and heritage. The aim was to test whether such activities could work as a possible intervention for boosting heritage connectedness, and to explore any impacts on wellbeing and nature connection.



IN A NUTSHELL

- A one-mile trail around a walled garden in a National Trust property
- Booklet with map and a set of prompts to notice, engage and reflect
- Surveys before and after measured heritage connectedness, nature connectedness, social connectedness and wellbeing
- Statistically significant improvements to heritage connection, nature connection and happiness
- Improvements were greatest for those whose scores were lowest at the start.
- Proof of concept: Heritage connectedness can be improved by targeted activities

Calke Abbey

A self-guided heritage trail was designed to invite people to notice, engage and reflect on heritage within the garden and grounds of Calke Abbey in Derbyshire, a country home estate that is one of the National Trust's most-visited properties. The property was handed to the National Trust in 1985 and includes an 'unstatelike home' on the site of an old priory, a number of farm buildings including stables and a riding school, and an expansive estate of 600 acres encompassing a historic walled garden, pleasure gardens, ancient trees and woodland, and parkland. One-third of the estate is recognised as a National Nature Reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The estate has a Visitor's Centre, café, restaurant, and shop.



Heritage Trail

The heritage trail focused on the walled gardens, originally constructed in 1772-4, which includes several different garden spaces and buildings – some established later in the early 19th century. The trail began in the stable block area, then took participants past the house, along a path in the pleasure garden up to different areas of the walled garden (including a flower garden, old kitchen garden, garden buildings, and physic garden), through a small wooded area and to a grotto in the pleasure garden and then back up to the stable block area ending by the 'smithy'. Notable heritage features included in the trail were:

- an auricula theatre and (empty) aviaries in the formal garden,
- a 300-year old Oak tree,
- the 'gardener's bothy' filled with various gardening paraphernalia – presented as if it was still in use (including a pair of boots by a chair in front of a fireplace),
- an extensive vegetable and medicinal herb garden with a number of scarecrows
- a 65-metre long 'gardeners' tunnel' which was used by garden staff so they were not visible to the family when they were walking in the grounds.
- an artificial grotto – a half-domed feature with Derbyshire minerals and replica stalactitic flowstone

The trail was just under one mile in length and was estimated to take people around 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The trail route was shown on an illustrated map in a 16-page A5 booklet, printed in colour on glossy paper, along with 15 prompts for engagement with heritage spaces and features. Each prompt was associated with a particular 'pause-point' and included a written invitation for participants to notice, imagine or reflect on an aspect of self- or place-in-time, and the connections between these. Key information about each heritage feature was provided, but this was minimal. The prompts drew on emerging findings from our qualitative research, based on ways of engaging with heritage

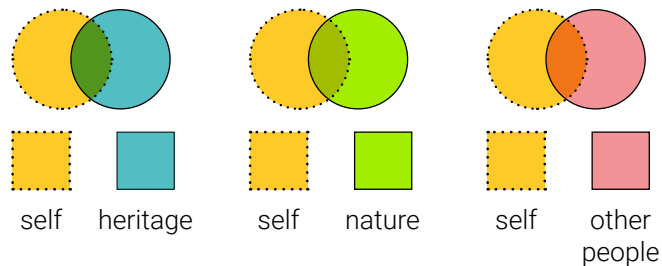
that appear to be important in creating a sense of connection. Each prompt was designed to either draw attention to a heritage feature and highlight the traces of time (e.g. notice the grooves left on the stone windowsill created by gardeners sharpening tools), invite reflection on the passing of time (e.g. consider the 70000+ days measured by the sundial and the rhythm of sunrise and sunsets), imagine what the place would have been like in the past (e.g. what has this Oak tree witnessed over the centuries?), prompt sensory engagement (e.g. find a smell that stirs a memory), link the heritage features to their own lives and pasts (e.g. what food and herbs has your family used in times of poor health?), and explore personal memories (e.g. when have you encountered a scarecrow?).



how did we collect data?

Participants were recruited on-site, over 4 days in August (one Friday and three consecutive Saturdays). A researcher was present with an A4 sign inviting people to help test a heritage trail in the gardens, and the heritage trail booklets, at a table set up near the Visitor's Centre and Café and Restaurant area. The positioning meant that the table was visible to most people entering via the main carpark, whether they were heading towards the house and estate, or the café area. There was a large map beside the table that showed visitors their options for where to eat at the site.

Participants were provided with the heritage trail booklet, with a QR code on the inner cover to access an online survey to complete before the trail, and a QR code on the back page to access an online survey to complete at the end of the trail. Each survey took approximately two to three minutes, and measured heritage-, nature- and social-connectedness and wellbeing (happiness and anxiety). Information about demographics, wider engagement with heritage and the site, and perceptions and evaluations of the experience of the trail, was also collected. Analysis compared individuals' scores before and after completing the trail. When people finished the second survey they were provided with a digital voucher for a free drink at the café.

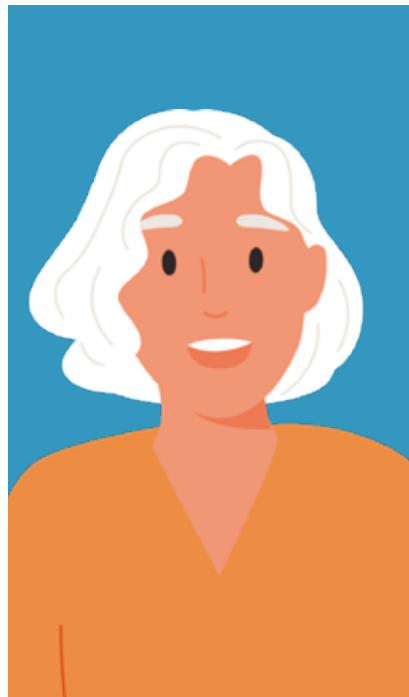


Connectedness was measured using adaptations of the 'Inclusion of other in self' scale, in which people choose from a set of overlapping circles that best represent their relationship with another person, or with nature, or with heritage.



who took part?

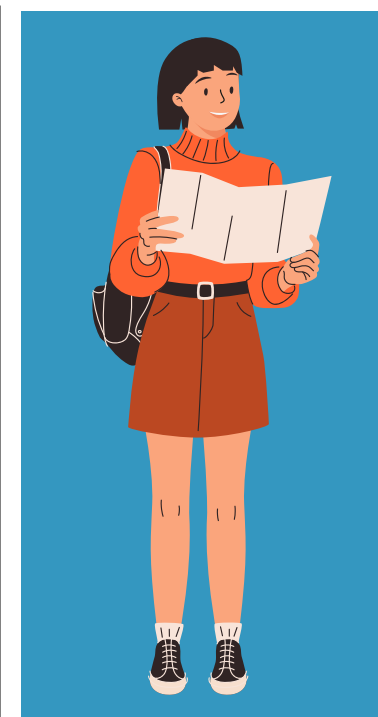
110 people completed the first survey ('Time 1') and 112 finished the second survey ('Time 2'), after the trail. Of those who completed the Time 2 survey, 19 had not taken the first survey. After matching the Time 1 and Time 2 data, paired data was available for 83 participants, with the remaining data removed from the analysis (typically because there was no matching ID code for both Time 1 and Time 2). Responses with less than 30 minutes between Time 1 and Time 2 surveys were deleted as it would not be feasible to complete the trail in this time. This resulted in a final sample of 64 participants.



Ages ranged from 18 to 72 (M=43, SD=12.9) with 24 identifying as Male (38%), **38 as Female (59%)**, and 1 non-binary/third gender. The sample was 77% White, 9% Asian or Asian British, 3% Black, Black British, Caribbean or African, 3% Mixed or multiple ethnicities, 3% other, and 3% did not know or preferred not to say.

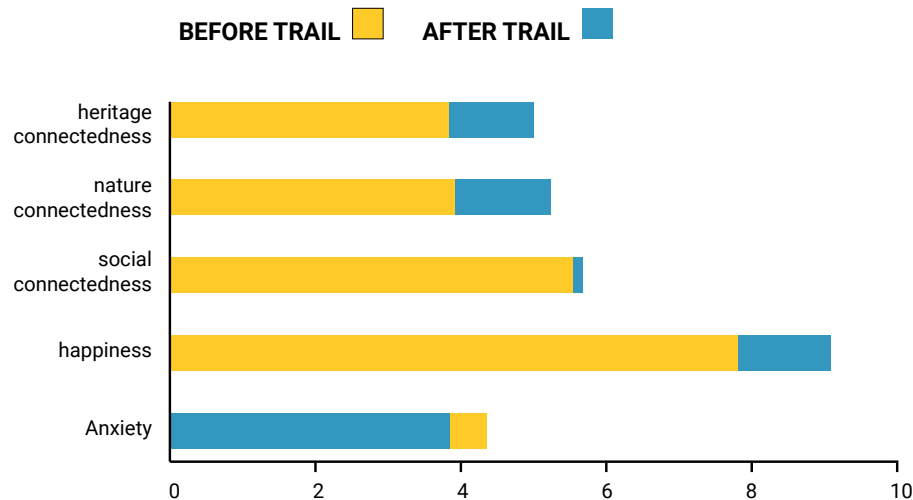


Three participants completed the trail by themselves, 8 (12%) with friends, **50 (78%) with family**, and 2 (3%) with 'other'. Just under half of the sample (N=29, 45%) had not visited Calke Abbey before, with 11 (17%) having visited once, 9 (14%) a few times, and 11 (17%) visiting regularly.



Two participants had never visited a National Trust property before, 13 (20%) said they did not visit National Trust properties often, **25 (39%) visited fairly often**, 20 (31%) visited quite a lot, and 3 (5%) said they visited all the time. Nearly two-thirds (N=41, 64%) were National Trust members.

what did we find?

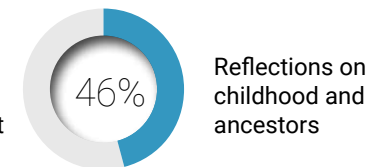
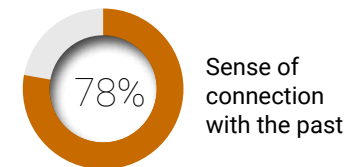
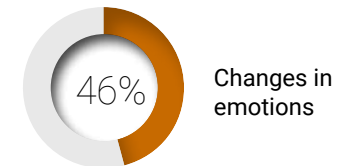
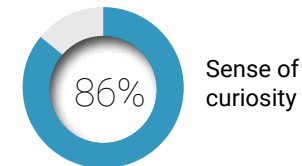
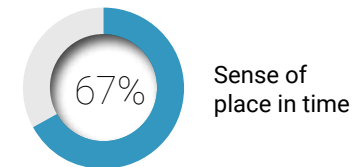
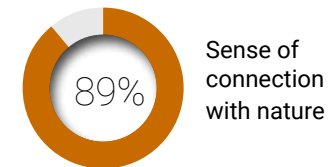
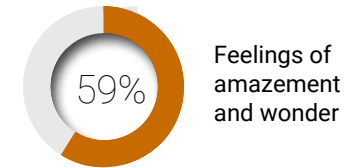


Key results

- Participants' sense of heritage connectedness, nature connectedness and happiness increased significantly after completing the Heritage Trail.
- Heritage Connectedness scores improved by 31% on average, Nature Connectedness scores improved by an average of 34%, and happiness by 17%.
- Improvements were greatest amongst those who started with the lowest scores.
- When asked about their experiences of the trail, the most strongly endorsed experience was a sense of connection with nature, followed by a sense of curiosity, and sense of connection with the past.
- The vast majority enjoyed the trail and activities, found it easy and would consider the prompts in future heritage engagement (88-94% agreement for all).

Experience of heritage connection trail

Percentage of people in agreement (agree or strongly agree) with each of these statements



94%

The vast majority enjoyed the trail overall



91%

found the activities easy



91%

enjoyed the individual activities



88%

would consider the questions and activities in future engagements with heritage and natural sites

Experiences of the trail and reflections on heritage connection.

A group from Trekkers - a community organisation who coordinate group hikes and wellbeing walks for the global majority visited Calke Abbey to take part in the heritage trail and a focus group. Around 16 people completed the trail, with 14 people then taking part in a focus group discussion in a quiet room at the site. Demographic data was incomplete, but of data provided there were ten females and two males (two not stated), ages of 7 participants ranged from 25 to 62 (Mean = 42; seven not stated), and ethnicities included Asian or Asian British (N=1), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (N=7), Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (N=3), and White (N=1) (two not stated).

"it's almost like, wow, I wonder what kind of people they were."



The discussion lasted approximately one-hour and explored participants' experience of the heritage trail (i.e. enjoyment, thoughts about the map, trail, activities, and whether the trail impacted a sense of connection with heritage) and meanings of heritage and heritage connection more generally. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed to produce a descriptive thematic summary.

Participants reported enjoying the trail, finding it fun and interesting. During the time of the study, there were additional signs and activities

on the pathways up to and around the gardens as part of the 'Summer of Play', including riddles which were enjoyed by participants and considered part of the heritage trail experience.

Experiences with the booklet itself were mixed – some didn't use it at all, others found it useful to read the prompts and additional information. The map was helpful to some, whereas others said elements of it were confusing. It was noted that a 'map enables community' in the sense that people can gather around

a map to see where to go, and some participants said they like having something physical to hold. There was some discussion about alternative formats. People said an audio version or an app-based version would be good, with some noting that alternative formats would be useful for neurodivergent people and children.

When asked if there were particular elements of the trail experience that stood out to them, most responses focused on the sensory and aesthetic experience – the colours, beauty and smell of the flower and herbs, with people feeling drawn towards colours, experiencing a sense of wellbeing walking around.

When asked if they felt more connected to the past after completing the trail, some said no and explained that they didn't feel they could relate to the people who were there before. The gardeners' tunnel, built by the family so they wouldn't see the gardeners when they were out walking in the ground, was a point of particular interest, with one participant asking:

Like what kind of people were they that they felt that? People walking around their garden to make it more beautiful, that they didn't want that in their view. They just didn't want that. And it's almost like, wow, I wonder what kind of people they were.

However, the garden and the herbs were a point for connection for some participants: "Our families from India, they're farmers, they're landowners, like they work their land."

The potential for the food and spices to be a point for connection was highlighted, and as something that was under-emphasised in the trail and site, as shown in this exchange between participants:

P2: *You know sometimes, like when you're looking at some of the plants, I've never seen some of the plants before (...) and then it made me question, I wonder where they come from and how they came here. You know people travel and then take samples and bring them back.*

P3: *From India-*

P2: *Yeah, spices and things like that (...) that could be the way that you've a connection, but you don't actually know that.*

P1: *Mmm, that's a good point actually. As in like where did this spice originate.*

P2: *And some of the plants. Because they are collected, aren't they?*

There was curiosity about where the workers lived, and some noted that because they didn't go into the house, they felt less able to connect with the specific time periods associated with the property. This was particularly the case for one participant, with a keen interest in history and historic properties – particularly in relation to the war period – who noted the missed potential to relate to the history associated with the actual building. They noted that while "the bricks and mortar it isn't mine. My people never lived like this", a sense of connection

did not specifically need to relate to personal heritage. They were a National Trust member and very interested in National Trust properties but noted "I'm not looking to find myself in (...) that (...) because it's interesting. It's relevant to the country that I live in and its monarchy and other historical relevance."

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who liked the history but didn't connect personally – because of class rather than ethnicity. They had noted that they connected more to the 'potting sheds' (in Calke Abbey garden) than to the house:

Can I just say, because obviously I'm the only white person here, I don't feel any connection to heritage here.

P4: *Can I just say, because obviously I'm the only white person here, I don't feel any connection to heritage here. My family are common- the only thing I'm going to connect with here is (...) the working past. (...) I don't feel any connection to heritage here as a white person (...) I don't think this is like my history and stuff like that, I just like the fact that it's history. (several): Yeah.*

P5: *As you said. Yeah, yeah. So in terms of heritage, it's absolutely relevant because this is English heritage and this is what the country's been about and that's what I expected to*

This house I would imagine is like many others, the wealth from it probably came from the slave trade, but nobody would say that because it's like, Oh my God, [whispers] we don't talk about that.

see. I didn't anticipate a blackness or brownness or white- you know, it is what it is. It's old buildings that are relevant to our country.

These comments make a distinction between heritage related to ancestry and class, and the history of the country as a whole – as something people can enjoy and connect with even if they do not have a sense of 'ownership' of the site-specific history. The conversation also explored how being white did not necessarily mean being British, with European heritage often being ignored or hidden amongst some white groups.

There was some discussion about whether aspects of heritage the participants could have related to would have been evident in the house and its artefacts or paintings – whether, for instance, there would be any artefacts from the Caribbean inside. Similarly, questions were raised as to whether they had ethnic minorities working in the garden. These later led to a discussion about elements of history and heritage that are hidden or kept quiet. Participants described the general tendency for

heritage sites to not fully explore 'how did we get here' – from the lack of information about where the plants and herbs originally came from, through to limited exploration of the contributions of multiple cultures into producing contemporary Britain. From the multiple invasions that shaped the make-up of modern Britain ("the Danes, Scandinavian, Romans (...) it's such a mixed pot (...) a lovely pot of different cultures and languages and ethnicities"), to the status of curry as England's most popular dish, to the work and suffering of others that underpin much of the wealth evidenced in historic properties:

P1: *So, like, for example, this house I would imagine is like many others, the wealth from it probably came from the slave trade, but nobody would say that because it's like, Oh my God, [whispers] we don't talk about that.*

P2: *We don't want to know.*

P1: *Yeah. But we know, okay. It either came from that, or it came from tobacco, or it came from cotton. Which, if you think about it, was all part of that anyway.*

It was suggested that if the National Trust acknowledged and engaged with the origins of the wealth of the properties they own, there would be more opportunities for connection with other groups who may not identify with the surface-level heritage of a property:

P3: *"They just need to be open and honest, and then that will open up a conversation. Not to brush it under the carpet. Because I think at the end of the day, regardless of how bad the history*

was, it's there.

P4: It's the history.

P2: It's history, you can't get rid of it. You just can't. So, it's important that they acknowledge it. And it that way you know it can all be connected.

They just need to be open and honest, and then that will open up a conversation. Not to brush it under the carpet. Because I think at the end of the day, regardless of how bad the history was, it's there.

Participants were asked what heritage connection meant to them personally. One person noted that they feel a sense of connection when they see someone who looks or sounds like them, and participants shared examples of events that did represent their culture and led to a sense of heritage connection. Personal connection to heritage was described as shaped by exploration of family trees and ancestry, names (including self-chosen African or English names), food, ceremonies and traditions, and language. Awareness of and engagement with cultural practices was recognised as important – both in relation to ethnicity and to class.

Discussion

The focus group discussion offers insight into the perceptions and experiences of a group under-represented in the heritage sector and academic research on heritage engagement. These insights are important for shaping design of heritage connection experiences and activities, particularly when these take place in spaces that do not (visibly) reflect the personal heritage of people with different ancestral or class-based backgrounds.

In terms of the trail itself, it was clear that engagement with beauty, smell and colour were highlighted as enjoyable and are likely to play a key part in the wellbeing benefits associated with a trail in a garden setting. The vegetable garden offered the most potential to spark a sense of personal connection, via familial links to gardening and growing as well as to the ancestry of the plants themselves – potentially as species collected from other countries.

The story of the tunnel highlighted the different experiences of different groups of people associated with the site – the workers who were kept hidden from the family's view. While a class-based distinction meant that visitors from a working-class background may be able to imagine their ancestors at the site, it was not



clear if ethnic minorities also worked at Calke Abbey. Participants also discussed how deeply interconnected the lives of others, and other nations, are with the traditional English properties. While a stately home may not feel like 'my heritage', the wealth that supported them was typically generated through the work of slaves, and the day-to-day management of the properties utterly dependent on the workers.

Importantly, some noted that a personal connection per se, was not considered essential to a visitor's enjoyment of history and heritage. Personal interest in the past, and the capacity to connect to universal experiences of beauty and the senses, can lead to emotionally meaningful experiences and offer a connection with heritage that is different from a

sense of 'owning' or belonging to heritage. Whether the absence of a personal or ancestral connection to heritage can lead to a strong sense of 'heritage connectedness' as construed in this wider body of research remains to be explored. This is likely to be particularly relevant in understanding experiences of heritage tourism, and the experience of heritage connection for those who are new to an area or country.

Initiatives to support heritage connectedness should seek to acknowledge and explore the

hidden heritage connections. While there are dominant stories, characters, and artefacts in any heritage venue, there will always be those that are less accessible and often unconsidered. As well as the untold stories, unacknowledged contributions of some groups of people, and unstated origins of natural and human-made artefacts, historic properties and site are often very focused on distinct periods of time. As such, there are fewer opportunities to engage with the much broader socio-temporal dimensions of a place, the 'bigger stories' of which we are all a part. For a sense of heritage connection that focuses on continuity and relationality, all these dimensions could be opened for exploration to engage with the deep sense of interconnectedness of people, place and time.

6. Conclusions

What is heritage connection?

Heritage connection is about meaningful engagement with heritage

Heritage connection is not simply contact with or exposure to historic places or things – it requires thoughts, feelings and actions that actively link people to heritage and histories. While equitable access to heritage is important, it is the quality of heritage engagement that matters for connection. Both the literature and heritage professionals speak about moments of connection that are embodied, sensory, emotional and meaningful. Heritage connection involves a unique quality of attention to heritage and history, a noticing and appreciation of heritage in the everyday, and an interest and understanding of stories of objects, places and people across time. To feel a sense of heritage connectedness was to feel a sense of belongingness, groundedness, and rootedness. It involves new perspectives of self and others, and is associated with feelings of awe and wonder, pride and empathy. Connection may also play in role in heritage stewardship – those who feel connected to a place are not only more likely to feel pride in it but are more likely to defend it against criticism (Public First, 2025). The work offers further support for the idea of heritage connection as having cognitive, emotional and behavioural pillars.

Heritage connection involves personally meaningful and emotional engagement with heritage, through thoughts, feelings and actions that nurture a sense of belonging in place and time.





Heritage connection reflects subjective meanings and requires approaches that honour complexity, invite dialogue, and support safe, inclusive engagement with diverse and sometimes difficult histories.

Heritage connection is personal and varied.

Heritage connection and engagement mean different things to different people. The relevance or importance of historical sites, objects or events are subjective and individual – yet often single stories, time periods, and sites dominate heritage conversations and engagements. Many of the elements interconnected with these heritages are often ignored or silenced – such as the contributions of slavery to the wealth behind stately homes and estates. Widening the scope of heritage to welcome and celebrate multiple heritages, explore hidden and absent heritages, and lean into the universal ‘human heritage’ opens opportunities for more people to nurture deeper heritage connections.

Inviting stories – not just telling them – can open conversations and give greater voice to communities themselves. Alongside important considerations of widening access to heritage should sit a focus on access to opportunities for heritage connection. Connection can be found in any heritage context, given appropriate prompts and support. At the same time, heritage should not be forced on people – some people may not feel that heritage is of importance or interest. Heritage’s value sometimes lays more in its role as a vehicle for social connection, than in the heritage per se.

Communities should be involved in heritage initiatives, in meaningful and inclusive ways. Understanding what communities want, their understanding and use of specific terminology, and foregrounding their experiences are fundamental. There are excellent examples of participatory, democratic and community-led approaches that respect the agency and interests of communities. Such approaches emphasise people’s relationship with heritage, and treat communities as citizens, rather than consumers of heritage. The ‘de-expertification’ of heritage may more fully offer opportunities for discovery, connection, and ownership.

It is important to acknowledge that while heritage is understood to support individual and community wellbeing, it can be associated with a sense of division and ill-being. In some cases, heritage is used by those pushing an agenda of alienation and discrimination. Heritage may also be associated with both individual and cultural trauma and suffering. Trauma-informed approaches to heritage that focus on safety, trust and empowerment are important steps towards working with people in ways that recognise a sense of connection with heritage may not be a positive experience for all.

What conceptual and practical contributions can heritage connection offer?

Heritage connection sits at the intersection of a diverse body of work that explores how people think about, feel towards, and engage with heritage.

Heritage connection sits at the intersection of multiple disciplines and topics

The concept of heritage connection aligns with pockets of research across multiple disciplines – heritage and cultural studies, archaeology, tourism, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, environmental sciences, allied health, and more. Theories of place and identity intersect with studies of heritage and landscape, tourism and museums, nature and social connection, communities and public health, nostalgia and aesthetics. Exploration of subjective, emotional and meaningful heritage experiences is found in many disciplines, with heritage studies itself a transdisciplinary field. However, there is surprisingly little psychological research on heritage, despite the key themes of the heritage literature, such as identity, belonging, culture, place, and wellbeing, being fundamentally psychological topics. By foregrounding the relationality of heritage, heritage connection shows promise as a cross-cutting and multidimensional concept that can advance understanding of what heritage means to people, how they experience it, and why it matters.



Heritage connection is a relational approach which can fill empirical and practical gaps.

Heritage connection introduces a novel psychological approach to understanding how people think, feel and act towards heritage, with potential to address conceptual, empirical and practical gaps in understanding the experiences, impacts and processes of heritage. Relational approaches, such as nature connection, are increasingly recognised as critical for the wellbeing of people and planet. Heritage connection introduces a relational approach to heritage by considering people's subjective sense of relationship with place and others across time. The research in this project, in common with past research, has demonstrated that heritage nurtures a relational identity – a sense of self-in-relation to place, people and time - and relational understandings of place and community. However, there has been little conceptual exploration of this to bring together these understandings, or to quantify these qualities of being. Heritage connection offers a way of measuring, exploring and nurturing the existential relatedness (Nolan, 2019), or sense of being 'part of something bigger' that is such a key theme of literature and our work.

Practically, heritage connection could operate as both a predictor and outcome measure for wellbeing, which simplifies the breadth and complexity of current measures of benefits. If heritage connection works like nature connection, it could incorporate many of the wellbeing dimensions into a single proxy measure. This would be particularly useful



in capturing eudaimonic benefits of heritage – strongly evidenced in qualitative studies, but difficult to capture in surveys. Measures of heritage connection could also enable non-instrumental assessments of the value of heritage - an important counter to traditional approaches that focus on assets and heritage use. This could inform methodologies for evaluating Culture and Heritage Capital, and better demonstrate the subjective value of heritage.

Heritage connection offers new ways of understanding individual, group and population level relationships with heritage, and potential for standardised approaches allowing easier synthesis and comparison. A relational approach to heritage sees heritage as embodied and personal, subjective and fluid, lifelong and everyday – yet, as evidenced by nature connection research – it is possible to consolidate all these complex subjective elements into a singular concept that can be quantified. If it is measurable, it is more easily explored and modified. We can find out who feels more or less connected to heritage and why, to identify pathways to heritage connection – what specific ways of relating to heritage are most likely to lead to a stronger sense of connectedness? The results can be applied to develop ways of working with visitors, communities, and individuals to nurture deeper connections with heritage.

Heritage connection offers a relational framework that brings together diverse understandings of how people relate to heritage, enabling these relationships to be explored, measured, and strengthened.

Why does heritage connection matter and how is it deepened?

Heritage connection is important for individual wellbeing and community cohesion

The research and heritage professionals identify a strong association between historic environments, heritage, and heritage engagement with a range of wellbeing outcomes. While heritage helps people 'feel good' and offers spaces for sensory and social engagement, it also offers opportunities to strengthen a sense of meaning and purpose. Fundamentally, such benefits come through the capacity for heritage to nurture people's relations with themselves, place and other people. The relational aspects of heritage also help explain the ways that heritage can support community wellbeing, bringing a sense of collective cohesion and belonging. The role of heritage in establishing a sense of place can help bring people together in ways that are increasingly important in the face of change and mobility. Our pilot study found that a trail designed to connect people with heritage also increased a sense of happiness, supporting the potential benefits of developing heritage connection interventions for wellbeing as well as heritage engagement.

Heritage connection nurtures relationships with self, place, and others, offering wellbeing benefits that extend from personal happiness to collective resilience.

Heritage connection (and wellbeing outcomes derived from it) can be boosted by invitations to notice, engage with and reflect on heritage spaces and stories

Our pilot study offered proof of concept - heritage connection can be boosted by a simple intervention that invites people to experience a sense of time, and themselves relative to time, place and people. Based on work that found knowledge, sensory experiences, emotional resonance, imagination, and meaning-making are part of connecting with heritage, the trail offered invitations for people to notice and engage with heritage through the senses, imagination, and emotions, and to reflect on how the heritage site related to them and their personal heritage. Comparing scores before and after, we found that heritage connectedness scores increased by 31%. Participants also felt happier and more connected with nature after the trail, suggesting the value of further

exploring relationships between connection to heritage and to nature. Qualitative data revealed the importance of subjective experience with the heritage site and the trail invitations, with different aspects of self (ethnicity, nationality, class, age, personal biography, ancestry, 'being human') offering various points of connection. Together the results suggest that the benefits of heritage do not 'come from' heritage sites and objects, but from subjective, relational engagement that invite thoughts and feelings about self-in-relation to time, place and other people. There is a clear opportunity to develop interventions to boost heritage connection in visitor experiences, wellbeing initiatives, community engagement, and more.

We found proof of concept in an intervention to boost heritage connection through relational engagement with a heritage site, inviting people to notice, feel and reflect on relations between place, self and time.

What are the innovations and barriers in work connecting people to heritage?

Heritage professionals are creating opportunities for connecting people with heritage but face systemic challenges.

There are a wide range of initiatives and approaches relating to connecting people with heritage. Work is being undertaken to explore notions of heritage literacy, everyday heritage, and heritage values, which all intersect with studies of heritage connection. Both large and grassroots organisations are developing innovative and community-led approaches to connecting people with heritage. Nationwide initiatives such as Heritage Open Days and Festival of Archaeology are championing opportunities for people to explore, learn, play, and experience heritage. Heritage is being embedded into social prescribing schemes, including training and provision of resources as well as opportunities, and heritage is a key element of schemes designed to nurture sense of place and create community hubs. Critically, participants talked about the cuts being faced by the sector and that those most involved in connecting people and communities were often most vulnerable to these cuts.

Heritage connection could help establish a cohesive and defined area of practice that can support the wider recognition of existing work connecting people with heritage. Heritage professionals and practitioners are aware of how critical this work is for individual and community wellbeing, but there is the risk that the work may be seen by policymakers as nice-to-have, but easy to cut. Following the example of growing policy and professional recognition of nature

connection as an area of practice, heritage connection could offer a similar key thread as a defined area of practice. Opportunities for embedding heritage connection in policy are important. Initial steps may include incorporating it into culture and heritage capital methodologies to better assess the social and economic benefits of feeling connected with heritage. BOX: Heritage professionals and academics are developing innovative, community-led approaches to foster heritage connection, but systemic barriers and policy gaps risk limiting its integration and long-term sustainability.

What next?

Future work is needed to develop the concept, understanding and application of heritage connection. This programme of work has suggested that the notion of heritage connectedness sits at the intersection of a complex body of academic literature and aligns with the perspectives and experiences of heritage professionals. As a concept, heritage connectedness offers something unique, a relational approach to heritage that has a person's subjective sense of connection to heritage at its heart and is associated with individual and social benefits. The pilot study shows the feasibility and efficacy of a simple heritage connection intervention, and the value of a simple single-item heritage

This is the beginning of a larger journey to define, measure, and apply heritage connection, unlocking its potential for wellbeing, identity, and inclusive heritage practice

connection scale as outcome measure in a pre-post design. These are promising starting points for a much larger programme of work to better understand heritage connection, why it matters, and how to strengthen it. It is clear there is much more to find out – what does heritage connection mean to different people? Who is more or less connected to heritage and why? How should heritage connection be measured? Why does the concept of heritage connection matter, and for whom? How is heritage connection formed and deepened? These questions form the basis of a research agenda to better understand, predict, and strengthen heritage connection.



Agenda for Heritage Connection: Research, Practice and Policy



To explore:

- what heritage and heritage connection mean to diverse groups of people
- different ways of referring to and describing 'heritage' and histories.
- different forms of relationship with heritage
- what activities are associated with different relationships with heritage
- the cognitive, emotional and behavioural pillars of heritage connection
- how people experience and describe moments of connection with heritage
- associations between heritage connection, social connection, nature connection, wellbeing and sustainability/stewardship
- the social dimensions of heritage connection and relationship between individual and community-level heritage connectedness
- how heritage connection changes over time and develops across the lifespan
- how the relational approach of heritage connection can be considered alongside instrumental/asset-based valuation approaches (e.g. emerging Culture and Heritage Capital)

To develop:

- tools for measuring heritage connectedness
- a heritage connection framework
- pathways to heritage connection
- standards for evaluation
- interventions for heritage connection

Methodologies:

- systematic literature reviews
- large-scale surveys
- community research
- arts-based methods
- observational studies
- experimental studies
- longitudinal studies
- biopsychological methods
- agent-based modelling

Practice and Policy:

- heritage connection research network
- guidance and training on heritage connectedness
- flexible framework for design of activities, spaces, communication and events
- integration into social prescribing approaches
- cross-sector applications – education, health, urban planning, environment, farming

Theory of Change

Our Theory of Change model offers an ambitious and wide-reaching overview of the inputs and activities needed to advance understanding and application of heritage connection for broad public and social benefits. Our work so far has supported some of the assumptions that underpin this model and helped reveal the steps that may be needed to establish the potential long-term impacts of further work.

Aim

To advance understanding and application of heritage connection to support people and places

Inputs:

- Interdisciplinary academic knowledge: relational approaches; heritage studies; psychology; wellbeing; place and identity; nature connectedness; community.
- Professional and practical expertise: research methodologies; heritage engagement, heritage management, social prescribing, health and wellbeing, public engagement, community groups
- Heritage sites and activities
- Funding

Activities

- Review and synthesis of literature
- Large scale surveys of heritage connection, heritage engagement and associated factors and impacts
- Develop typologies and frameworks for engaging with and relating to heritage
- Explore community experiences and perspectives
- Examine everyday heritage interactions
- Design and test heritage connection interventions
- Explore public benefit and social impact of heritage connection
- Develop valid and reliable measures of heritage connectedness
- Expert and community reviews
- Create public engagement forums, activities, and events.
- Develop cross-sector relationships and collaborations

Outputs

- Heritage Connection Framework
- Pathways to Heritage Connection
- Heritage Connection Scales
- Academic publications including systematic reviews, conceptual overviews, patterns and trends in heritage connection, heritage connection experiences and perceptions, experimental outcomes
- Public reports, presentations, blogs and social media
- Policy briefings
- Accessible guidance for heritage and wellbeing professionals
- Heritage connection consortia

Outcomes

- New knowledge about heritage connection (psychological and social aspects, diversity, impacts, and applications)
- Awareness and understanding of heritage connection amongst academics, professionals and public
- A relational approach to heritage
- Heritage connection recognised in public benefit, social impact, and culture and heritage capital measures
- New approaches for heritage engagement
- Professional development of heritage and wellbeing professionals
- Greater integration of heritage in health, education, environment, and planning sectors
- Integration of heritage into nature connection, nature recovery and climate adaptation initiatives

Impact

- Deeper heritage connections with heritage
- Improved wellbeing, social connection and community cohesion
- Greater recognition of wellbeing benefits of heritage in policy and practice
- More exploration of time and temporality in psychological research and theory
- Greater public awareness and appreciation of everyday heritage
- Informing design of policy for urban planning, health, education
- New routes for heritage stewardship and care
- Wider and more diverse engagement with heritage
- Wider use of heritage connection as a metric

Assumptions:

1. Heritage connectedness is about a person's subjective sense of relationship with heritage
2. Heritage connection can be measured
3. Heritage connectedness is associated with individual and community wellbeing
4. Heritage connectedness can be boosted by engaging with heritage in specific ways.
5. There is academic, public and professional interest in understanding and strengthening heritage connections.

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RESOURCES TO INFORM AND INSPIRE HERITAGE CONNECTION WORK

HUBS AND NETWORKS

[Historic England: Wellbeing and Heritage / Heritage and Society](#)

[National Academy for Social Prescribing: Heritage and Social Prescribing Hub](#)

[Historic England/Council for British Archaeology Wellbeing and Heritage Working Group](#)

REPORTS:

Heritage and Wellbeing

Historic England:

[2018 Wellbeing and the Historic Environment](#) / [2025 Evidence Enquiry](#)

[Wellbeing in Volunteers on Heritage at Risk Projects](#) / [Heritage and Loneliness](#)

Heritage Alliance:

[Heritage Health and Wellbeing Report](#)

What Works Wellbeing:

[Heritage and Wellbeing Technical Report](#)

[Community Archaeology](#)

[Young People's Engagements with Heritage](#) (University of Wolverhampton, Arts Connect and Historic England)

[Young Archaeologists Club Impact Study](#) (Council for British Archaeology)

INITIATIVES/PROJECTS

[Heritage Open Days](#)

[Heritage Schools](#) (Historic England):

[My Heritage Project](#) (Young People and Heritage - Council for British Archaeology)

[Roots and Futures](#): Collaborative Community Heritage Project (includes toolkit for researching heritage with under-served communities)

[Archaeology on Prescription](#)

[Change Minds](#) (Restoration Trust's Culture Therapy project)

[UNESCO Local to Global](#)