



National
Trust

Research Strategy

2017 - 2021

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Hundreds of
research projects
hosted each year



Everything we do in pursuit of our core purpose relies on knowledge and expertise. Knowledge about our landscapes, properties and collections underpins every aspect of our visitors' experiences, while knowledge and expertise ensure we can protect everything in our care for future generations to enjoy and learn from. Research is the process by which we can increase our knowledge and understanding, helping us to continually improve our conservation work and the experiences people have when they visit.

Research takes place in many forms across the National Trust – from the many PhDs we sponsor and practical testing of new conservation techniques to the hundreds of research projects we collaborate in and host at our places each year. Our research interests are diverse and integrate nature and culture; while many organisations focus primarily on collections conservation, curatorial or environmental research the National Trust spans all three. Research into rare butterflies, prehistoric settlement and Chinese wallpaper takes place in parallel with research into coastal change and daylight management in historic interiors. However, this is the first time we have brought together this research into a single strategy that systematically approaches where and how we need to build our knowledge in pursuit of our national strategy.

Think of this document as a manifesto of intent. These are the knowledge gaps we know that we need to address as we attempt to deliver our ambitious ten year strategy, *Playing our part* (2015-2025). This research strategy (structured to reflect the strategic themes in *Playing our part*) provides a framework to guide the range of research we commission, supervise and carry out and inform our decisions on collaborative research and pursuit of research funding.

The National Trust is exceptionally well suited to collaborating in and hosting research that helps advance knowledge of benefit to the heritage and natural environment sectors. With over 4.5 million members and millions of visitors each year, we also have the potential to generate significant research impact. Consequently, our research strategy strongly emphasises knowledge exchange and working in partnership with others for mutual benefit.

Vision

Through our research, to continue to deepen our knowledge, ensuring we have the evidence we need to deliver internationally-renowned conservation and fulfil our core purpose; to inform decision-making; and to help people understand more about and be inspired by the properties, land and collections in our care.

Definition of research

Research is “an endeavour to discover new or collate old facts by the scientific study of a subject or by a course of critical investigation.”¹

This research strategy focusses on academic and conservation research; from practical applied research testing conservation methodologies to challenge-led research to pure or ‘fundamental’ research uncovering new historical information about a property. This is treated as distinct from the market research or audience insight conducted by our internal Audience Insight team and from our routine monitoring and data collection activity (governed by our Conservation Data guidelines), which provides primary sources for research.

Research

(processing, analysing and organising data to answer questions)

Knowledge

(what is known by a person or persons; it involves interpreting data and information, adding experience and context)

Data

(statistics, words or images yet to be organised and analysed to answer a specific question)



Guiding Principles

As a charity research is an investment. It is important we maintain high standards to ensure maximum benefit and impact. When undertaking, commissioning or managing research, we will follow these principles:

- ✓ **Clear:** Our research will address clearly-articulated research questions, issues or problems, set in context of other research in that area and using appropriate methods
- ✓ **Strategic:** Our research will help us deliver the ambitions of our ten year strategy and our core purpose
- ✓ **Outcome-driven:** Our research will be designed with clear application in mind; to create a process, solution or technical enhancement in order to increase our efficiency and deliver our core purpose; to support a policy requirement; to help deliver aspects of a Property Business Plan; or to enhance our knowledge in order to inform our conservation or interpretation
- ✓ **Audience-focused:** Our research will always have an internal client and end user
- ✓ **Appropriate:** We will understand that not every decision requires new research and recognise existing knowledge and accumulated experience, both internally and externally
- ✓ **Scalable:** When designing a research project, we will also think beyond individual collections, properties and regions to the wider application / contribution to the knowledge of the Trust and public
- ✓ **Collaborative:** We will work strategically with partners to address research gaps and share knowledge in a collaborative and efficient way
- ✓ **Accessible:** We will make our research open access in a timely manner and will store it so that it remains accessible

¹Angus Stevenson (ed.), Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014

Research Priorities

The Trust will draw on, commission, carry out or support research that helps improve understanding in the following priority areas, which have been identified with Trust specialists. We will review these areas periodically during the lifetime of the strategy.



Looking after what we've got

Our top priority remains the conservation of the 350 historic houses, parks and gardens and their collections, 775 miles of coastline and 248,000 hectares of land in our care.

Much of our work revolves around what we've got (cataloguing), and the condition it is in (largely dealt with through our Conservation Performance Indicator process and business as usual conservation work).² We describe conservation as 'the careful management of change' and it is important that we have the best tools, techniques and knowledge to tackle natural and man-made threats. We need research that helps us address the physical condition of our assets and explores how they are responding to change. As an evidence-based organisation we also need to understand the world we live in and how this may change in the future, which in turn informs policy. During the next five years we will prioritise research on:

Heritage science³

- Increasing understanding of agents and rates of deterioration and ability to monitor, control and implement preventive conservation measures
- Identifying the best materials and techniques for repair and increasing understanding of their longevity
- Development of new tools and measures to manage the impacts of increased visitor numbers while retaining the balance between conservation and access

Climate Change

- Understanding resilience or capacity for adaptation of built properties and their collections to extreme weather events (e.g. flooding, drought and storms)
- Adapting to the impacts of climate change in a range of landscapes and habitats, including at the coast and in woodland
- Understanding resilience to new pests and diseases and the best ways to manage their impact on plants, gardens, animals and people

Energy & Infrastructure

- Locating renewable energy infrastructure in sensitive landscapes
- Improving energy efficiency in historic and 'traditional' buildings
- Locating other infrastructure – including transport and housing – sensitively in landscapes and townscapes

Other activities in the Trust may also lead to research projects and outputs, particularly in support of major projects and conservation work. We will also continue to keep abreast of the latest external research into the potential impacts of current and future trends on political, social and economic change.

350 historic houses, parks and gardens and their collections



248,000 hectares of land

775 miles of coastline



²The Conservation Performance Indicator (CPI) is used to measure how well we are putting conservation into practice at our properties. Objectives are defined and prioritised for the particular conservation needs of each property. Progress is assessed annually.

³See also National Trust Collections Conservation Science Research Strategy (2009)



A healthier, more beautiful natural environment

We are playing our part in restoring and maintaining a healthy, beautiful natural environment.

To do this we are working to improve all our land to good condition and during this process we will develop and share new economic models for land use in the UK. We are also working with tenants and other landowners to improve the condition of land, where possible working at a landscape scale. This is an ambitious task and during the next five years our research foci will be on nature and land management.

We also need to maintain knowledge transfer of the latest ecological and environmental research (on a variety of issues) from academics and other organisations into the Trust.

Nature

We want to use the insight we have on how our land and wildlife is performing to add to wider knowledge and inform best practice. Our focus is often at landscape scale and working with nature. We take a place-based approach to looking after habitats and species. We need research that, using our land as a case study, examines:

- The best techniques for restoring and creating new areas of Priority Habitats (including calcareous grassland, wood-pasture and parkland, traditional orchards and blanket bog)⁴
- The benefits and costs to nature of connecting habitats and making more space for wildlife in farmed landscapes
- Ways of balancing public access, nature conservation and change, including at the coast
- The wildlife benefits of working with natural processes (and at large scales) vs. a more traditional interventionist approach to species conservation ('wildlife gardening')
- Efficacy of different tools, techniques and models of citizen science in assessing biodiversity and engaging people with nature

Land management & Landscapes

We want to ensure that the land we manage is healthy and capable of providing a range of benefits now and in the future. We will prioritise research which provides us with new tools and techniques and increases our understanding of:

- Soil stewardship and quality, including managing and monitoring soil organic carbon in lowland and upland areas
- Catchment management and working with natural processes to manage floods, drought, water quality and to benefit freshwater wildlife
- The best incentives to encourage sustainable farming, sustainable food production techniques and multi-functional land use among landowners and tenants, including new approaches to payments for outcomes and ecosystem services
- Landscape character, the balance of components inherent within it (e.g. natural, historical, archaeological, visual) and how this balance informs land management choices

⁴For more information on recognised priority habitats see http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/PDF/UKBAP_PriorityHabitatDesc-Rev2011.pdf

Experiences that move, teach and inspire

We want to offer experiences that move, teach and inspire, grounded in high quality academic research and a rich understanding of our assets and their significance. There are three areas we will explore over the next five years.



Engagement

To create engaging experiences, we need to understand peoples' visit motivations and the best ways to engage with them. This first area is closely linked to pieces of audience research done by our Audience Insight team but specifically focuses on research on:

- Geographic and demographic differences in access to and engagement with heritage and green space
- The role of heritage in the modern world, including how different types of heritage are represented, experienced, explored, contested or ignored

Programming

The second area feeds into our National Public Programme, an ongoing series of events and exhibitions around a central theme that provoke people to think differently about history, identity and the world today. This must be underpinned by good research and using our properties, land and collections as case studies we will focus on the following themes:

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer histories (2017)
- Histories of women and suffrage (2018)
- Radical landscapes – looking at places that have played a deeper role in moments that have shaped individual rights (2019)
- Legacies of slavery (2022)
- Seventy years of Indian independence and the people, places and collections illustrating the intertwined history of India and Britain (a five year research programme 2017-2022)

Histories

Thirdly we want to expand capacity and capability not only at a national programming level but at a property level, to unearth new or untold stories for the benefit of our visitors and tell these in interesting ways, work supported by our curators and archaeologists among others. We will tackle the following questions:

- How the histories of our landscapes, collections and properties can be enhanced by, and contribute to, an understanding of wider national and international context and their contemporary relevance
- How landscapes, collections and properties can reveal the social, cultural, creative and political history of their makers, users and owners
- How the histories of our properties can most effectively be presented, exhibited and explored through different media, including digital interpretative tools

- What the most effective and least invasive techniques to enhance visitor experience and interpretation in the outdoors are

Other activities in the Trust may lead to research projects and outputs, particularly in support of large conservation projects or major exhibitions.



Helping look after the places where people live

We recognise the increasing pressures on local heritage and green space and the planning pressures on the places where people live.

The nation needs ways of sustaining the places and landscapes people use, while respecting historical integrity and taking into account changing societal needs. During 2017 and 2018 we will be testing our thinking and will carry out research into the following areas, to understand how and where the Trust is best placed to help.

We will carry out research to increase our understanding of:

- Alternative funding models for local heritage and parks
- Why and with what results people engage in local heritage and the historic environment
- The power of place – how places can help root people in collective cultural identity
- The best ways to measure the value of local heritage and parks, including natural capital



Collaboration

We know we cannot address our knowledge gaps alone. Collaboration enhances our capacity and capability, offers access to new material and expertise and introduces new methodologies, technologies and audiences.

In turn, we can offer partners access to natural laboratories and sites for research, properties and collections; conservation data; the chance to learn from Trust experts; and – as Europe’s largest conservation charity with over 4.5 million members and millions of visitors – the opportunity to demonstrate significant research impact. Many of our properties are held inalienably so we care for them for ever, which also enables us to think in centuries.

Much of our research is already done in partnership and in the last five years we have:

- Been actively involved in over 50 Research Council funded projects
- Developed a few formal research partnerships with universities individually and through consortia
- Hosted or provided non-academic supervision of post-graduate students
- Enabled staff participation in collaborative projects
- Provided access to land, properties, collections, data and archives



Over the next five years we will continue to enhance and extend our collaborations, partnerships and knowledge exchange. When working collaboratively, we will follow the principles of good collaboration, including agility, scalability, sharing knowledge and skills, a multidisciplinary approach and co-production. This work will include:

- Developing strategic research partnerships with universities, individually and through Doctoral Training Partnerships (consortia of universities) to help tackle our knowledge gaps and enable knowledge exchange
- Exploring new opportunities and building on our relationships with the research councils, including the Natural Environment Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council
- Participating actively in large joint research programmes
- Exploring and developing new and more agile approaches to collaboration (e.g. targeted workshops, micro-internships, crowd-sourcing content from experts) as well as traditional collaborative models (e.g. PhDs and placements)
- Working with colleagues in the environmental and heritage sectors to co-create, conduct, support and share relevant research
- Inviting proposals for collaborative research that helps us deliver the strategy
- Continuing to provide access to researchers to our land and properties, encouraging them to involve us in their research and share the outcomes

Knowledge Exchange and Dissemination

It is important that we share the knowledge we acquire, both internally and externally. Good dissemination and knowledge exchange helps increase understanding and leads to sound application of research.

All of our research papers and research summaries will be stored on an internal research repository (to be developed in 2017) for our staff to access. Our ambition is also to make our research open access in as timely a manner as possible.

Research can result in a variety of outputs, from theses and papers to position statements, journal articles, site interpretation and publications. To maximise knowledge exchange, we expect our staff to produce a summary of findings for colleagues and to communicate research outcomes using a variety of channels, including:

- Online publication (including blogs, website content and e-publications)
- Grey literature publications
- Exhibitions, talks and practical demonstrations
- Conferences and external, peer-reviewed journals

There is also a growing interest in the process of research and in citizen science and citizen heritage. We will consider the opportunities arising during the lifetime of research projects to communicate the latest findings and engage different audiences. This may include ‘research in action’ displays at properties, blogs, media opportunities and opportunities for visitor participation.

Finally, our places and collections are repositories of knowledge and inspiration. Management of historical knowledge and data is important to avoid repetition and provide different perspectives. There is a need to ensure historical organisational knowledge is identified, communicated, stored and used. During the lifetime of this strategy we will work with the Archives & Records team and other colleagues across the National Trust to develop a process to tackle our research ‘backlog’.



Funding

In 2015/16 the Trust spent over £700,000 on commissioned or collaborative research projects (in addition to some £350,000 in staff time) and provided in-kind support to many more. However, the Trust currently has no central fund for research projects and this makes it even more important that we make the best use of the resources available.

During the lifetime of this strategy we will explore new opportunities to secure capital funding to enhance research capability and enable knowledge exchange and public engagement in research. Staff will be expected to consider research needs as part of project planning and budgeting, particularly in light of major conservation or transformation projects.

We will explore opportunities (e.g. a small research fund) for seed funding or match-funding research projects which address the priorities outlined in the strategy, as well as funding access to external resources. We will also continue to strengthen our work with the research councils, including the Natural Environment Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.



Our People

We have over 80 staff members whose roles regularly involve research, including our National Specialists, Curators and Conservators. Research is also undertaken and commissioned by property staff and we have a number of volunteer research groups at properties. We estimate that we spend over £350,000 annually in staff time on research, but we have no dedicated, full-time research staff and have limited research facilities.

We need to maintain and develop the appropriate skills and experience to collaborate on and deliver high quality research projects. Guidance on good research practice - including dissemination, collaboration and a research 'checklist' - is available to Trust staff but we will also explore opportunities for staff training and development with partners, as well as seeking evidence of research skills when recruiting for research-active roles.

As well as holistic oversight of the delivery of the strategy, we will have research champions in each of the National Trust's seven regions and countries. Regional research champions will maintain oversight of regional activity and research partnerships, contributing to the national picture. We will also have central staff championing and monitoring research activity in each of the priority areas.



Partnership with University of Oxford

The University of Oxford is working with the National Trust to explore effective ways of using academic research to improve visitors' enjoyment of and engagement with historic places.

Over two years Trusted Source, a Knowledge Transfer Partnership project supported by Innovate UK and AHRC, is amassing a wealth of data which is being consolidated into concise, easily understood articles about history, culture and the natural environment. The information can be used in staff and volunteer induction training, by room guides in houses and to support interpretation at our places and in guidebooks. Articles are also available on the internet for everyone to access. This is part of a wider strategic partnership between the University and the Trust, which also includes research supporting a major conservation project at The Vyne and the 'Story Interventions' project. 'Story Interventions' are designed to tackle particular questions about a National Trust property's collection, story or importance and involve targeted workshops with Trust staff and Oxford researchers. Workshops have so far taken place at Hughenden, Uppark, Ham House and 2 Willow Road. It is hoped that the projects and the partnership will provide blueprints for future collaborations between academics and the heritage and museums sector.



Chinese Wallpaper research

In April 2016 National Trust specialists and expert colleagues from the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Pavilion organised an international conference on Chinese wallpapers in historic houses, supported by Coutts & Co.

Chinese pictures started to be used as wall decoration in Europe in the late seventeenth century. This led to a thriving trade in full-length Chinese wallpapers depicting gardens and landscapes, which were popular across Europe. The Trust has the largest collection of these wallpapers still on view in their original locations and research in the last few years culminated in the publication of Chinese Wallpaper in National Trust Houses (2014), co-authored by Trust staff members Emile de Bruijn and Andrew Bush with Dr Helen Clifford from University College London. The 2016 conference was the first of its kind to examine Chinese wallpapers in the round; not just as historic house decoration, but also as Chinese art, as trade commodities, as physical objects and as markers of taste and fashion. Speakers included curators, conservators, academics and wallpaper makers from Europe, America and China. Thanks to this continued knowledge-sharing and collaboration, we are beginning to gain a better understanding of the long-standing role of Asian art in our own western tradition, as well as thinking about how we can share this knowledge with our visitors.

