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Bringing history to life: the role of heritage in education

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I am going to talk about the role that heritage organisations can play in engaging education groups with history and also the links that can be made with the media. It is certainly an exciting time for anyone working in history or heritage education. We have in recent years experienced a huge upsurge in interest in history, as we have heard throughout this conference, and particularly in the talks of [Michael Wood](#) and [David Starkey](#). There seems to be an ever-increasing media interest history, a bubble which I sincerely hope will not burst. So there is a real opportunity for history education providers, be they schools, heritage organisations or museums, to tap into this popular interest in history and turn it into a lifelong passion for the subject.

Last year there were almost three million educational visits to historic sites in England, including castles, houses, gardens, churches and monuments. The majority of these were groups from primary and secondary schools. But there was also a substantial number of visits from colleges of further and higher education, universities, trainee teachers and groups such as the [University of the Third Age](#), reflecting the value of historic sites as vehicles for learning. This value has gained increasing recognition over the past few years and the provision made by historic sites for educational visits has certainly improved in a dramatic way. There is now a wide range of activities on offer for educational groups. Many sites have dedicated education staff who develop programmes and lead activities. Some offer interactive sessions with costumed interpreters, which is a particularly powerful way of bringing history to life for children. Other sites have education volunteers who work with groups of all ages and abilities, and many heritage sites and organisations provide resources to enable teachers to lead visits themselves, such as training courses and publications. Of course, the quality of provision is not the same across the board, and some historic sites simply do not have the resources to invest in education. On the whole, though, there has been a marked improvement over the past ten years, and this has been helped in no small part by the [Heritage Lottery Fund](#) and the emphasis that it places on education.

The value of heritage to education extends beyond visits to traditional historic sites. The historic environment is all around us – a local church, a street or a public park, for example, provide rich resources right on our doorstep. Every part of the neighbourhood in which we live is a product of the past. Different societies, events and influences have shaped where we live and will continue to shape future developments. Enabling young people to understand value, enjoy and care for the historic environment is at the very heart of the citizenship ethos. The historic environment can inspire them to play an active part in issues within their immediate locality as well as national and even global issues. So the advent of citizenship in the curriculum has offered real opportunities for history and heritage. Another very positive development is the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's](#) (QCA) hybrid history GCSE, which forges links between history and related vocational areas, such as media, heritage, conservation and museums. All of these developments will help to strengthen the links between heritage and the study of history in formal education.

Furthermore, the value of heritage as a learning resource extends beyond the realms of formal education. I mentioned earlier that more and more people are finding out about history through television, books and magazines. They are also doing so by visiting historic sites. As [Michael Wood](#) said, history is officially the most popular leisure activity in Britain with an estimated seventy million visits to historic buildings and places of interest in England alone, officially – and perhaps surprisingly – making it more popular than football. History is remote, even recent history, but its physical remains are not. Visiting a site, whether it is a battlefield, a country house, a mill or a dockyard, brings history to life like nothing else. Books and television can be passive experiences, while visiting a site combines a range of active sensory experiences. In my view, historic sites represent the most powerful way of bringing history to life for people of all ages. They can provide that initial spark of interest that leads to a lifetime's passion for the subject.

In recognition of the educational potential of these visits, heritage organisations are investing in activities and resources for specific learners. For example, [English Heritage](#) has just completed a two-year programme to enhance the range of resources for families at its sites. These include story boxes, handling collections, activity sheets and family backpacks. We have also introduced courses for adults with basic skills needs as well as workshops on traditional crafts and building skills. Events form another major strand of our work in informal education – or, as some term it, 'education by stealth'. Events are, I believe, one of the most powerful ways of making history come alive. They can enhance understanding and enjoyment of historic sites more powerfully than anything else. If done well, they recreate past lives, characters and events, but are surprisingly undervalued as an educational resource. English Heritage stages more than 400 historical events a year at sites across the country, ranging from battle re-enactments and jousts to falconry, lectures and tours. Re-enactment events form an important and popular way of engaging people with history. More and more re-enactment groups are springing up, which means more competition and therefore better quality: the competitive environment leads groups to become increasingly meticulous. Modern enthusiasts learn to ride as the Romans did, they make their own chain mail, weave and dye their own cloth, produce tools, weapons and even eat food from authentic recipes.

Historical events also form one of the most effective and immediate ways of collaborating with the media. Last year [English Heritage](#) worked in partnership with the BBC to enhance the educational potential of the [Battlefield Britain](#) series, developing events including recreations of the Battles of Hastings and Naseby, [Boudicca's](#) revolt, and even the Spanish Armada at Tilbury Fort, albeit with a slightly reduced Armada. These events enabled viewers whose interest had been sparked by the series to find out more about a particular subject, battle or period, and the events proved hugely popular. We are hoping to develop further partnerships with the media and are currently working on events to tie in with the [Sea Britain](#) theme, which will be explored on the BBC's [Coast](#) series. English Heritage has also recently created a heritage education group in collaboration with [BBC History magazine](#), which aims to raise awareness of heritage education and make its resources more accessible to more people.

Not only is heritage education active at historic sites, but there is also a great deal of good work going on at the moment to engage hard-to-reach audiences in their own communities. [English Heritage](#) has recently created an outreach team whose remit is actively to engage new audiences in learning from and enjoying the historic environment. The team is working on a range of projects with groups such as young people, ethnic minorities, low-income families and people with disabilities. These include creating a community heritage garden in Great Yarmouth or tackling vandalism at [Bolsover Castle](#) by working with young offenders. The team is also working to broaden participation in [Heritage Open Days](#) and in the [National Blue Plaque Scheme](#). This has proved to be a two-way learning process: as well as helping audiences to learn about heritage, it has challenged our own views of what heritage means to other people and what is important to them.

I hope I have been able to highlight some of the ways in which heritage can bring history to life. There are, of course, many more initiatives that I have not mentioned, but that just goes to show how much is happening at the moment, and the huge potential for working links between heritage organisations and the media. To conclude, I would like to highlight what I see as the biggest challenge facing heritage education despite recent developments, and that is the barriers that schools often face in making visits to historic sites. The value of such visits as a means of inspiring students of all ages and enhancing their understanding of history has been proven time and again, but a combination of pressures of time and resources, and the all-too-well-publicised health and safety risks, has

meant that it is now more difficult than ever for schools to make these visits. The publication in early February 2005 of the [Education and Skills Select Committee's Second Report](#) on education outside the classroom and the government's backing of school visits is a huge step forward, but I believe there is still more to be done. Heritage organisations and the media must work together to promote the value of these visits in helping people learn about their pasts, and in making history live for everyone in the present.

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