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Best Practice Guide

How can I engage with and make the most of Heritage



**HIGH
STREETS
TASK
FORCE**

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An Introduction to Heritage

The heritage sector has undoubtedly been impacted by the Covid- 19 pandemic as new challenges have emerged regarding the upkeep, preservation, and use of historic locations. Debates within the heritage sector and town planning throughout history have gone back and forth about preservation and modernisation, yet many discussions have not focused on how heritage can be used to provide for individual and community needs.¹

Heritage sites include old castles and abbey ruins, but also represent buildings from the modern world; places which have played a role in the story of local communities and places. It also represents museums, architecture, alongside statues and memorials as well as plaques and information boards.² Heritage does not just relate to the urban landscape but also relates to the physical landscape. Whatever its form, heritage helps us make sense of the world around us and can mean different things to different communities.

Heritage helps towns to define, market and sell themselves as unique locations, and heritage makes places unique. There has been a greater awareness of the historic environment in the last few decades, with towns and cities starting to rethink how to use heritage in and around the high street. There are certainly more speciality towns in England that have emerged in recent years as towns reinvent themselves as places such as ‘historic towns’, where heritage places a crucial role in their identity, development, and image.³

Heritage has an important future in our town centres and high streets. They help improve the overall experience and attractiveness of the place. They offer a diverse range of uses and allow towns to adapt when needed. In essence, they are important when we consider themes around pride in place.⁴ The future must be more than just preservation or modernisation but rather a use which benefits local needs and raises the profile of the town.

The Impact of Heritage on Society

We consider heritage an anchor for high streets and town centres across the nation. Heritage helps create, shape, and maintain local pride and identity as people store memories within, interact with and use them. They also encourage an attractive and unique image of their town.

¹ [Local Heritage Listing: Identifying and Conserving Local Heritage \(historicengland.org.uk\)](https://www.historicengland.org.uk)

² Elizabeth Crooke., *Museums and Community: Ideas, issues, and Challenges*, (Routledge: 2007).

³ Example can be seen with the Shrewsbury Big Town Plan [Our Themes and Goals • Shrewsbury Big Town Plan](#)

⁴ Julian Dobson, ‘Boosterism and belonging: ‘pride in place’ and the levelling-up agenda’, *People, Place and Policy* (2022), 16/2, pp. 170-176.

Heritage offers a variety of economic benefits for communities and government. Financially they boost local economies and provide a wide range of jobs and skills. These sites have huge pulling power in bringing people to town centres as they intrigue and fascinate tourists. Often popular heritage locations draw in a large selection of non-retail offers to themselves due to the increased footfall in the area.⁵

Heritage sites provide many different social benefits. These sites can be useful in bringing communities together or help us educate on difficult and complex pasts which are still relevant for today, where difficult pasts are brought to the forefront and used to ask important questions. Historic England have noted that, heritage also helps people feel more positive about their local area, 'contributing to a stronger shared sense of place and increased civic pride.'⁶

Recently, it has been found that heritage provides a variety of environmental benefits, some of which are educational. Sites from the industrial revolution allow us to freely discuss the impact of climate change on towns and their wider areas, whilst historic industries show examples of sustainable industry.⁷ As well as learning from these sites, Historic England have argued that historic sites not only preserve local, sustainable industries like brick making, but help to preserve natural habitats and woodlands, helping to maintain wildlife.⁸

Alongside this, heritage sites also provide emotional connections for communities to the places they live. This can be through the stories they tell, the memories they provide, their contemporary uses or future uses and their architectural design.⁹

Therefore, heritage has a broad range of impacts, all of which can benefit high streets and town centres. To understand how it can affect your own place, there needs to be analysis of the stories which these sites tell, and how they can be used in the present to meet contemporary needs. Historical awareness of their importance in the local place is important as these stories can help various local communities but also an understanding of how new stories can be made within these places is crucial for their longevity.

How to Improve Interaction with Heritage

⁵ [Valuing culture and heritage capital: a framework towards informing decision making | Resources | High Street Task Force \(highstreettaskforce.org.uk\)](#)

⁶ <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/heritage-counts/pub/2014/value-impact-chapter-pdf/#:~:text=Heritage can encourage people to,place and increased civic pride.>

⁷ These arguments can be found in the All Party Parliamentary Report for Conservation, Places and People [CPP-APPF-First-Report---The-Value-of-Heritage-011222.pdf \(appg.info\)](#)

⁸ [Heritage and the Environment \(historicengland.org.uk\)](#)

⁹ [Personalities of Historic Places – Why Do Historic Places Matter? - YouTube](#)

As towns aim to reinvent and reinvigorate their high streets and towns, we must encourage engagement with heritage sites. These places provide a variety of non-retail offers for consumers to enjoy and experience. This means that we should strive to increase the accessibility to these sites, improve their attractiveness and safety, alongside ensuring that people and communities can interact with them in different ways.

Engaging people from all ages to interact with the sites are important. Education, relaxation, and leisure are functions that these heritage anchors can and must provide. Encouraging schools to engage with local heritage is essential to build pride and help students understand local stories from their area. Some sites are useful to hold events and festivals, others provide green space, whilst others provide other leisure uses. Integrating heritage into policy of leisure, recreation and non-retail offer will help navigate these sites into the wider use of the town.¹⁰

Whilst preservation and regulation are important in maintaining heritage sites, relaxed rules on usage and development in some circumstances will be in how people use and interact with the sites. For example, permitting a wider range and diverse use in sites will encourage different groups to interact with the space. Recently, many towns have begun to illuminate their heritage spaces, which not only makes the site feel safer and friendlier, but it also allows some of the spaces to be used for outdoor events and can lead to new night-time activities which helps the night-time economy.

The Importance of Collaborative Partnerships within the Heritage Sector

Too often in the past, heritage has been run and organised by paternalistic organisations whose aim has been to preserve or modernise at all costs, but this has often forgotten residents and communities. Rather a collaborative approach should be the focus. This means discussions and interaction with a variety of different sectors, public, private, volunteering, and academic to see how particular heritage sites can best serve the community. This means that local place leaders should encourage networks and partnerships to ensure that the heritage meets the needs of different groups in the area.

Collaboration ensures that the stories told reflect the communities in the area, ensuring that complex narratives are not ignored, but are instead engaged. It means that these heritage sites are reflective of local identity and present an image which locals can control or influence, rather than being controlled by national organisations. Collaboration also ensures that stories

¹⁰ [Reviving historic town centres - People & Places \(people-places.net\)](https://people-places.net/)

within these sites do not remain static, but are rather diverse, and inclusive and ensure that they engage a wide audience.

Collaboration means that heritage sites can fulfil their potential and engage those whose interests stretch across the economy, education, environment, social wellbeing, conservation, and research. Although it can be complex, it ensures that heritage sites have a multi-functional purpose, allowing these anchors to reach tourists but at the same time meet the needs of residents.¹¹

Heritage Case studies

Hidden Middlesbrough

This project run by Navigator North, who are an organisation based in the Tees Valley, they are a creative organisation who promote and fund activities to promote local artists and creative initiatives in the Northeast. In Middlesbrough they led this project which engaged residents with the local stories of the past, covering a variety of different themes, forgotten voices and themes. Its aim was to 'illuminate how the buildings, industries, people and communities have influenced the broader culture of the town and might offer us alternative ways to think about and use the High Street in the 21st Century.'¹² Heritage sites allow innovation and creativity in our urban spaces, something which this project aimed to explore.

The project reached a wide audience, from visitors, residents, students, families, businesses and artists alongside local special interest groups and community groups. This allowed people to interact with the heritage spaces around them and impacted all age groups and communities. It highlights the diverse engagement and use of these sites and how they can be used in a variety of ways to interact with the public.

This was a collaborative effort and involved local community groups, artists, historians alongside national organisations such as Historic England, the Arts Council, and the Heritage lottery fund.

Jumbo in Colchester

After its disuse in the 1980s, the Jumbo water tower has been left standing in the centre of Colchester. Many plans were presented but many were rejected or stalled to a variety of

¹¹ For collaboration, see [Unlocking High Streets through Public and Private Collaboration | High Streets Task Force](#) and [Place Leadership in English Local Authorities - a critical success factor for vital and viable high streets | Resources | High Street Task Force \(highstreettaskforce.org.uk\)](#) and [Scoping culture and heritage capital report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

¹² [Celebrating Hidden Middlesbrough - Navigator North](#)

reasons. However, in recent years the Council began to integrate the tower in the local image of the town.

In 2022, plans were accepted to re-purpose the site and to make it once again useable. As the North Essex Heritage Trust note in the brief, the project 'seeks to restore, convert, and extend a historically significant building into a vibrant, community asset with a commercial edge, enabling the rejuvenated tower to play as central a role in Colchester's daily life as it once did when it provided the town with clean water.'¹³ In doing so, the famous water tower will now play a direct role for residents in the town, being transformed into a commercial space next to the theatre and high street.

The site has not only been backed and supported by the Heritage trust but has been part of a wider heritage collaboration with the local governmental authority and civic society.

Derwent Valley Mills UNESCO World Heritage Site

The Derwent Valley Mills Heritage site is run by a collaboration of different organisations, ranging from Universities, Parish Councils, National Organisations and Community Groups. These groups are working together to ensure that these sites are being used to help residents and tourists alike understand contemporary issues like the current climate crisis and provide examples of how sustainable industry can work. As noted by researchers at the University of Essex, that heritage sites can provide useful examples of how people have overcome obstacles in the past, how innovation has led to creative solutions and provide hope that something can be done.¹⁴ The sites in the valley for example, show how running water can be turned into power and although these sites are in a more rural location, the four industrial settlements of Cromford, Belper, Milford, and Darley Abbey all share in this local heritage location.

The projects aim is to 'create and promote a local, national and international understanding and identity for the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site as a cohesive and coherent whole, based on its global significance for all of humankind.'¹⁵ In this we find that heritage sites can use environmental issues to link themselves to the local, national, and international spheres, helping to educate, bridge gaps and promote local pride.

Liverpool's International Slavery Museum

This site is in Liverpool's Albert Dock. Part of a collection of museums first founded in 1851, this site was developed in 2007 to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave

¹³ [Jumbo water tower, Colchester \(architectsjournal.co.uk\)](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/jumbo-water-tower-colchester)

¹⁴ [Heritage and climate change | Blog | University of Essex](#)

¹⁵ [About the Derwent Valley Mills - Derwent Valley Mills](#)

trade, the site demonstrates how local places can reflect on difficult and tragic pasts. The site chosen as it is close to the docks where the eighteenth-century slave trading ships were maintained and in doing so linked Liverpool's involvement to the story that it told through its exhibition. The museum documents international slavery but focuses on Liverpool's involvement throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Working alongside local, national, and international organisations in a collaborative approach, the museum focuses on difficult pasts to help educate residents and tourists alike and commemorate the tragic events of the slave trade. This collaborative approach involves local historians, the police, academics, alongside community groups and national and international organisations to ensure that the exhibits are inclusive, diverse and community driven. It is a reminder that heritage sites do not need to be celebratory, but can be reflective, commemorative, and critical of the past to help educate and understand the present day. It also reminds us that our heritage sites can link us together locally, but also allows communities to interact globally and allow tourists and residents to engage with wider, global issues.

How to make the most of your Heritage Assets

1. **Identity key heritage sites in your urban area.** Create a Heritage list which identifies sites in your area. Think about what they offer, and are they accessible, etc.
2. **Collaborate with local stakeholders to meet local needs.** Using Heritage should not be paternalistic, but should include, involve, and celebrate local communities and different creative sectors.
3. **Involve communities to allow multiple stories to be told.** Heritage sites do not just tell one story for one community but possess multiple stories with which people form emotional connections. It is important that heritage is accessible for all, in different ways for different purposes.
4. **Develop a shared narrative between heritage locations.** Think about local, national, and international interests that will draw both residents and visitors alike to the sites in your urban area. This connection may be environmental, social, economic, or historic.
5. **Balance Conservation with usage.** Preservation of historical sites is important, but it needs to be carefully balanced with its usability. This will vary from site to site and each location needs to be sufficiently assessed.
6. **Document the progress.** Record the progress of working with heritage and communities which can be used to self-evaluate, as well as provide examples for other locations

25 Viable and Vitality Priorities

25 Vital and Viable Priorities Research has identified 25 priorities for attractive high streets that create long-term success. This Framework can be used by place leaders to prioritise action. Improving the usage and identification of anchors links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task. Improving heritage anchors can link to the following priorities: activity, experience, non-retail offer, appearance, place management, safety/crime, recreational space, liveability, etc. You can find more information about the 25 priorities [here](#).

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