

# Exploring the unique challenges of presenting English Heritage's castles to a contemporary audience

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## Abstract

The seventy-nine castles in the care of English Heritage Trust (EHT) are some of the most visually stunning and historically important in the world. In recent years, EHT has explored new ways of sharing the histories and stories of these properties with local communities and with domestic and international visitors.

This paper presents a review of these approaches, outlining the ways in which the Trust has applied different methodologies to castles within certain areas of operation, such as Interpretation; Digital Content; and Conservation. It assesses the self-reflection of EHT staff members from some of the organisation's operations as to how certain strategies and approaches have met the expectations of both the EHT and its target audiences. It outlines approaches to sharing our passion for these properties which were not heavily reliant on significant monetary investment, for instance examining how to re-interpret castles in the context of a challenging economic climate. It assesses some of the philosophies behind the decisions made as well.

These reflections are examined in the context of a new castle interpretation project currently underway, at Warkworth Castle in Northumberland, England. They are presented to our international colleagues with the explicit desire to share our experiences and improve our industry's approach to the interpretation of humanity's rich castle heritage.

**Keywords:** Castle, interpretation, heritage sector, public.

## 1. Introduction & why castles?

English Heritage Trust (shortened to EH) is the guardian of dozens of important castle sites. Part of its duty as a charitable organization is to give our members, and the wider public, the tools and means to access the stories of the castles and their historic communities (English Heritage, 2019). This paper outlines the approaches taken at a number of historic properties. Each castle is unique, so requires specific approaches to sharing its history and architecture, while also providing an innovative and

engaging story for the different groups of people who visit EH properties.

Many points raised here are not unique to castle sites, but they are assembled here because of the ways in which castles are prized and favoured by visitors above other medieval monuments, such as churches and monasteries, in England (and arguably elsewhere too). Castles have substantial appeal to the public imagination, and for better or worse, have been closely associated with the national stories of many of Europe's states. This legacy is not without its

flaws and contradictions, but the central conclusion remains: castles are very popular visitor attractions (Saxon, Logan, 2016).

### 1.1 Organisational aims: why do we do what we do, and why specifically for castles?

English Heritage is a charity that cares for over 400 historic sites and properties across England. Among these are over 70 castles which are some of the most popular and historically significant buildings in the country (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Graphic representation of the distribution of castles in the care of EH in context of British Isles and Ireland. © Google Maps.

For all properties, EH looks after the conservation of historic buildings and landscapes, as well as the care of collections of materials related to properties, ranging from dressed stone to archaeological archives of artifacts, and some documents. Castles present a familiar challenge in terms of sharing the story and history of historic sites: complicated architectural changes, including many unanswerable omissions; the nuanced histories of its owners; all alongside a desire to tell unusual, relatable stories which give the public insight into the medieval past, where public perception does not always align with up-to-date academic research and understanding.

### 1.2 How castle interpretation is undertaken

The process of refreshing the story of a castle site is undertaken through an interpretation project. This can vary in length and extent, but major projects usually take several years. The project team is headed by a curatorial lead (project manager), who is responsible for maintaining the overall vision and successful delivery. The other elements of the team comprise experts from within the organization whose expertise is essential for the success of the project. This includes a curator of properties, who ensures the longevity of the historic property’s fabric and compliance with the law in terms of invasive works at a site. Alongside is an historian who is usually tasked with authoring the content, specifically the text and images for a given project. Depending on the ascribed value and scale of artifacts connected to the site, and the presence of a site museum (or the budget to create one), a curator of collections is often also part of the core team. Together this group works with a wider array of colleagues, from individuals working in Digital Content, Interpretation and Conservation, to develop the interpretation scheme for a given site. Although a team can comprise a dozen members of different professional expertise, the core of an interpretation project is usually comprised of 3-4 staff.

### 2. Challenges to the interpretation of castles: “authenticity”, ethno-centrism and the Bodiam debate

There are many challenges to the interpretation of castle sites which are not unique to England (anticipated in Dempsey, *et al.*, 2019). Among a wider range of issues, the first is “authenticity”. In Europe, authenticity has often been the stated aim of interpretation, but as Heyen citing Worsley has shown, the precise meaning and scope of the concept of authenticity is not fixed (Heyen, 2005, p. 2). In a recent discussion of digital heritage projects in south-east Wales, it was remarked authenticity was considered a crucial role for the historian. An express ambition was to change the narrative around knowledge production from historians

as guardians of knowledge to historians as facilitators of a shared knowledge (Howell, Chilcott, 2013, p. 175). But, as is widely recognized, “heritage” is the part of the past which is selected for contemporary use, or a purpose of the present, and heritage as knowledge constitutes both economic and cultural capital. In this context, the knowledge and outlook of the historian is mediated by a socio-political context which is not always made explicit, but which finds manifestation in the narratives of the past which are prioritized in the present. For example, scholars may prioritize narratives of social cohesion at the expense of conflict, or working-class narratives ahead of aristocratic stories. The historian is not above reproach: this creates a challenge in the interpretation of castle sites (Link, 2015).

The second major challenge is ethnocentrism. In Britain, the conquest of England in 1066 by the Duke of Normandy is widely regarded as marking the beginning of the castle age. Traditional histories of early castles in England’s political heartland, which continue to dominate authorized heritage discourse, have been ethno-centric, pitting Normans against unhappy English (or “Anglo-Saxon”). Plainly this narrative is a poor representation of more recent nuanced scholarship, but at heritage sites we struggle to overcome this way of presenting the past, in broad historical episodes (McClain, Sykes, 2019, pp 98-9, 90), which are fixed in the public mind, and indeed taught in our schools (Department of Education, 2013).

The third major challenge to castle site interpretation is related to these last two. It may be summarized as the “Bodiam debate”, a shorthand in castles research circles for the argument over the character of one of England’s better-known castles. Chiefly the debate sought to determine whether Bodiam Castle was built as a fortification in the martial sense, or as a home with war-like ornamentation and cultural references (Platt, 2007; Creighton, Liddiard, 2008). While the debate is largely settled in the academy, in the public eye, castles are buildings associated with war, imprisonment and quasi-historical figures like King Arthur and Robin Hood. More recent popular

media like *Game of Thrones* has cemented this impression. While it is possible and necessary to reiterate the broad social character of castles in English history through an interpretation scheme in simple terms –“this is not a fortress but a home”– it is necessary to find ways of bringing colour and dynamism to that message through the broader scheme. This avenue of challenging preconceptions also opens the door to broader questions about identity and selfhood, gender and class which are not often addressed at castle sites, and in which we can do better (Dempsey, *et al.*, 2019, p. 14). Addressing these questions is not simply a matter of representation, but of investigation and exploration. The “Battle for Bodiam” also drew the focus of castles research on the “lived experience” of individuals and communities connected to castles (Cooper, 2017). Robert Gilchrist noted that historians “eulogised the male domain of the castle, reeking of sweat, testosterone and horses” (Gilchrist, 1999, p. 121). Though collectively castle researchers have attempted to move the debate forward from male-centric narratives, lingering issues remain, radically inhibiting the presentation of an authentic medieval past (Dempsey, 2018, pp. 782-783), which was not a world of sweat, horses and testosterone, to the wider public.

### **3. New approaches to English Heritage castle sites: digital content, site interpretation, conservation**

Having established the extent and significance of EH’s castle properties, how a project team approaches the development of a new interpretation scheme, and some of the challenges we face, it is now possible to turn to some case studies demonstrating how EH has approached the challenges to castle sites specifically.

One area of increasing significance to EH’s castle interpretation is its digital engagement. For castles, this relates not simply to the website pages for each of the properties the organisation looks after, but also more general pages aimed at drawing visitors to engage more fully with the organisation. Aligning with EH’s education ethos, several videos playfully exploring

the history and changes in castles in England were created and uploaded to YouTube. The first, *A Mini Guide to Medieval Castles*, uses an accessible illustration style and explained in an authoritative tone (English Heritage, 2017). To any castles researcher, the narrative outlined in this particular video is not without its problems; it presents a linear, evolutionary story of buildings changing over time, with an emphasis on the position of castles in periods of warfare. Nevertheless, the videos also draw attention to more nuanced interpretations, such as domestic life in castles, and their later appeal to wealthy men in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries. There is a tremendous appetite for digital content relating to castles; features touching upon castle themes are frequently very popular and engaged-with items on the EH website and social media feeds. Perhaps tellingly, another EH video – *What Was Life Like? Meet a Medieval Noblewoman* – has twice the number of views as the *Mini Guide* (English Heritage, 2018). Evidently, the audiences which engages with EH castles are keen to understand a wider array of stories than the explainer videos pertain to: the stories of “ordinary” men, women and children are especially coveted (Fig. 2).

To a certain extent, this stands in contrast with an institutional instinct within EH to frame castle narratives for public consumption which centre on warfare or a traditionally famous figure (usually an aristocratic man) of English medieval history. Furthermore there remains the impression that the story of castles is primarily one of stone, mortar, of building typologies and earthwork analysis. Going forward, it is apparent that a larger emphasis on developing web-based digital content which reflects the present state of academic research is a desirable aim; it would not only satisfy a public desire to engage more with EH castles digitally, but also, when based on-site, allow the organisation to tell more varied and dynamic stories about its properties in a medium (digital technology) that has great advantages of accessibility. There have been recent successes in this respect, at two castle sites (Goodrich,

Richmond) whose interpretation was recently overhauled (Fig. 2 yFig. 3).



Fig. 2. Twitter user's comments regarding web-based interpretation of Goodrich Castle. © Twitter.

The success of Goodrich Castle's new interpretation scheme at exploring stories centring on men, women and children of all statuses has just been touched upon (Dempsey, *et al.*, 2019, pp 8-10). Its ethos is very much a rejection of male-centric narratives of castle life. The project was certainly helped in this regard by the historic associations of the castle with an aristocratic woman, Countess Joan of Valence, whose household itinerary around her estates in Midland and Southern England are among the earliest documents of their kind on record. Today this castle was recognised as a visitor destination frequented especially by families, so the project mobilised a unique source of historic data alongside an ambition to explore the ruins in an engaging and historically informed way. Cards given to individuals feature a historic figure of varying social elevation and gender. Each person is invited, through their historical persona, to fill in blanks in statements about a given space. There is the freedom in this exercise to suggest ridiculous conversations, but this in turn requires visitors to informally explore what would be an appropriate social response in order to upend it. In turn,

visitors learn about the spaces, the historical figures and the social dynamics at play in a castle. The project was doubtless enhanced by the historic data connected to the castle, but its success may ultimately be ascribed to a willingness to reflect the hopes and aspirations of visitors to Goodrich, as well as offering an engaging activity. Visitors in turn also develop a connection with the castle's medieval occupants through role play and playful anarchy.

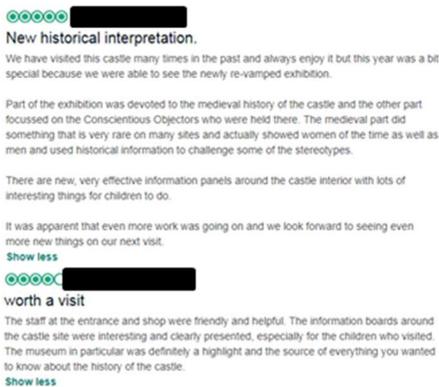


Fig. 3. Web-based feedback on site-based interpretation of Richmond Castle since the installation of a new panel scheme and renovated site museum. © TripAdvisor.

Where other projects were less successful at castle sites, the reasons identified reflect decisions about how the interpretation was undertaken, rather than its content; this is itself telling, and a useful corrective to the idea that Goodrich's success is down to fortuitous association with a rich source material.

A project to revisit the scheme at Walmer Castle, though not undertaken recently, is a case in point. Here, the new project replaced the existing audio guide with a technologically more sophisticated multimedia guide. In itself the content was not a problem, but rather the profile of the visitors to the site –mainly older individuals with altogether more infrequent engagement with digital technology– was not fully appreciated. As such, feedback on the new scheme was marred by some disapproval of the new multimedia guide. Anecdotal feedback also suggests that some visitors felt that the use

of screen media on castle sites jarred with the material and atmosphere of the site.

The more recent refreshing of site interpretation at Tintagel Castle has by a significant margin been very positive. However, the new interpretation scheme came under sustained criticism from supporters of the Cornish nationalist cause. While the arguments over historical detail have been rejected by EH, it has become apparent that a greater degree of engagement with a wider body of stakeholders would have avoided the worst of the criticism (Greaney, 2020). The cause of criticism centred around the project's emphasis on the dual narratives of history and myth associated with Tintagel, which lead to accusations of a proactive diminishing of perceived Cornish royal associations with the site in its early medieval history. These views reflect a longer discussion over the position of EH within a Cornish heritage landscape, which has recently been reviewed in detail.

Conservation efforts at Tintagel were intrinsic to the new interpretation of the castle. There had been ongoing concerns that the increase in visitor numbers would lead to damage to the ground surface around the monuments at Tintagel. However, the project also wanted to bring visitors across otherwise unvisited parts of this most dramatic of castles (Fig. 4), to enhance the sense of how history and myth were part of the same story being told. It was also desirable that visitors should experience the dramatic landscape of the castle, again to contribute towards a unique site history. In this sense, Conservation efforts at Tintagel were not isolated from a wider interpretation plan, but rather combined, to offer an enriched visitor experience. In this respect, though there is not space to explore it more here, engagement with the extraordinary material culture resources at castle sites must form part and parcel of any interpretation, a constitutor of the main narrative rather than a separate or isolated element.



Fig. 4. Photograph of Tintagel Castle before the installation of a new access bridge, reaffirming a medieval connection, in 2019. © Historic England.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although the castles of England are unique, the challenges of improving their interpretation and how we share our passion for them with the wider public, is not. The significant lessons from the cases examined here may be succinctly summarised as follows;

- Efforts must be made to tell new and dynamic stories at castle sites, and these must be told creatively;
- We must be aware both of what visitors expect when they visit any given castle, and also how they visit a site –in a group, as a family, etc–;

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- Visitors bring material and aesthetic expectations to castles. While we must acknowledge that technology has a place in interpretation, it is not a solution in of itself, and its use must be carefully considered to avoid a jarring experience;
- We must engage with stakeholders in the care and guardianship of castles, for the benefit of all involved;
- We must be aware that Conservation efforts, while undertaking essential material care, can enrich a site story.

Though there are further aspects to explore (as already hinted at), it is apparent that the unique challenges of England’s castle interpretation have a wider application.

#### Notes

Some of the themes raised in this paper have been anticipated by Dempsey, *et al.*, 2019 paper, which was published after the proposal for this paper was submitted. As a consequence we have endeavoured to explore a different set of questions raised. We would like to extend our thanks to various colleagues at EH who have taken time to share their experiences with us, and especially to Susan Greaney for sharing an advanced copy of her paper; the views presented here are ours alone, however, and do not represent those of English Heritage.

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