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# Isolation and Loneliness – opening up new stories and interpretive experiences at Calke Abbey

**Research Report**

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A list of RCMG research projects is available from  
<http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/research/rcmg.html>

## About the partners

### **Calke Abbey**

Calke Abbey is a National Trust property located in South Derbyshire. Taken over by the Trust in 1985, it is characterised by its peeling paintwork and overgrown courtyards. Calke Abbey tells the story of the dramatic decline of a grand country house estate through its conservation philosophy of repair not restore.

### **Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG)**

As part of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, RCMG combines academic rigour with practical experience of museum, galleries and heritage sites. Research teams are brought together to meet the specific needs and requirements of each project and their work to date has enabled RCMG to develop a unique set of skills, experiences and perspectives in capturing, analysing and interpreting the perspectives, experiences and voices of users, and non-users, of cultural organisations.

### **Duncan McCauley**

Duncan McCauley was founded in Berlin in 2003 by architects Tom Duncan and Noel McCauley in response to the evolving task range needed in museum and exhibition design. The work of the studio encompasses masterplanning, architecture, exhibition design and audio-visual production for museums and cultural institutions.

## Research team

Stewart Alcock	General Manager, Calke Abbey and Leicestershire Portfolio, National Trust
Jocelyn Dodd	Director, RCMG
Tom Duncan	Director, Duncan McCauley
Suzanne MacLeod	Professor, School of Museum Studies
Sarah Plumb	Research Associate, RCMG
Alison Thornhill	Community and Engagement Manager, Calke Abbey, National Trust

## Project Team

Heloise Brooke	Head Gardener, Calke Abbey
Patrick Burke	Consultancy Manager, Volunteering and Participation, National Trust
Kerrie Fletcher	Community Development Manager South Derbyshire CVS, Swadlincote
Alison Gimingham	Consultancy Manager, Volunteering and Participation, National Trust
Julie Griffith	House and Collections Manager, Calke Abbey
Rebecca Harvey	Midlands Curator, National Trust
Karen Heath	Volunteer, Calke Abbey
Sue Hubbard	Volunteer, Calke Abbey
Kate Jopling	Policy and Strategy Consultant, Jo Cox Commission
Zoe Knights	Engagement Officer, Calke Abbey
Kellie Payne	Research and Policy Manager, Campaign to End Loneliness
Caroline Taylor	Visitor Experience Manager, Calke Abbey





*'Some visitors told me they come to Calke alone  
and walk here because they feel safe here.'*

*Calke volunteer*

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## Overview

This report sets out the findings from a research project commissioned by Calke Abbey, a National Trust property in Derbyshire, and undertaken in full collaboration with RCMG (the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries) at the University of Leicester.

The project emerged as part of Calke's planning processes and the Calke team's desire to develop interpretation and programmes around the contemporary issue of social isolation and loneliness in 2019 in order to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Henry Harpur Crewe, 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet of Calke Abbey who was dubbed 'The Isolated Baronet' in his own time.

With an ambition to make a contribution to discussions and campaigns surrounding the contemporary epidemic of loneliness and potentially to the lives of ordinary people who might be struggling with loneliness, and aware of the need to enter this space from an educated and thoroughly researched perspective, Calke approached RCMG to ask them to 'think with' Calke about the potential opportunities and pitfalls of work in this area and to help Calke plan this work in such a way that it would: generate new and ongoing community relationships; deliver Calke's ambition to deliver high quality and sector leading interpretive practice; result in an exceptional visitor experience and programming for 2019; and leave a legacy of increased expertise, creativity and confidence amongst staff and volunteers to develop this and other work in the future.

For the RCMG team, the project offered an opportunity to expand research it had undertaken at a range of sites exploring the visitor experience and the role of the physical museum (a building and curated collections or an historic site and its contents) in the various encounters and opportunities for experience, action and expression that visitors might experience as opening up to them during a cultural visit. Interested in questions of the value of culture and its role in human wellbeing, the project offered an opportunity to ask how cultural organisations might take a conscious role in the fight against loneliness alongside government, public services, business and community groups (Jo Cox Commission 2018).

In the following pages, we describe the research process, set forward the key findings from the research, and set out a Plan for Stage 2 of the project.

*'There is a lot of stigma attached to loneliness, so it is incredibly hard to admit that you are feeling lonely ... It is important to recognise that feeling lonely is not your fault and that there are people who are ready to talk to you about how you are feeling, and offer support.'*

Laura Alcock-Ferguson,  
Campaign to End Loneliness

*'Young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate ... it is something many of us could easily help with.'*

Jo Cox, Labour Party MP

## The Brief

*Questions of isolation and loneliness have often been associated with Calke and the place itself embodies the histories of isolation which have shaped the lives of the people who lived here. As awareness grows of the complex challenge loneliness and social isolation pose to contemporary society, Calke is exploring its own history of isolation and using this work to drive new approaches to interpretation and community engagement. In 2018 and 19, Calke will be building new relationships and working with a range of partners to open up new stories and interpretive experiences and to reflect on Calke's spirit of place.*

After some discussion, the research questions were conceived as:

*How can Calke approach the theme of loneliness and social isolation in ways which:*

- deliver Calke's ambition to develop an ongoing programme of activity which sits comfortably within leading edge approaches to interpretation;
- generate new and ongoing networks and relationships from which new projects will flow;
- engage in contemporary debate and challenge;
- result in an exceptional visitor experience and programming for 2019;
- leave a legacy of increased expertise, creativity and confidence amongst the wider interpretation team at Calke?



# The Process

Between October 2017 and March 2018 a multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral research team was brought together which included researchers Jocelyn Dodd, Suzanne MacLeod and Sarah Plumb from RCMG, exhibition designer Tom Duncan from Duncan McCauley, and Alison Thornhill, Community and Engagement Manager from Calke Abbey, National Trust. The process began with a series of meetings and interviews and, once the research brief had been clearly articulated, the following methodology was developed and worked through:

## Strategic Workshop 1

An opening Strategic Workshop was organised in order to test the research focus and methodology (were we asking the right questions? was our methodology sound? what were we missing?) and to enable a number of experts (Kellie Payne, Research and Policy Manager, Campaign to End Loneliness; Patrick Burke, Consultancy Manager, Volunteering and Participation for the National Trust; and Kerry Fletcher, Community Development Manager from South Derbyshire CVS) to feed in to the project at its earliest stage. A number of questions and issues arose in this discussion which remained vital throughout the research process.

## Four Working Papers

A series of Working Papers reviewing existing research and highlighting particular perspectives considered to be of relevance to the project were drawn up. These 'quick and dirty' summaries of existing research and thinking included:

- 1) A working paper around the contemporary social issue of loneliness and social isolation
- 2) A further working paper on isolation and solitude
- 3) A paper exploring the nature of innovations in interpretation at historic sites
- 4) An image-based analysis of the physical site of Calke Abbey

## Visitor Research

A review of existing visitor research and of the site's audience segmentation data was undertaken. This was supplemented with additional qualitative visitor research to find out more about the nature of visitors' perceptions of, and responses to, Calke. 43 semi-structured interviews with visitors (individuals, couples and small groups) were completed and analysed.

## Volunteer Feedback

In consultation with RCMG, Alison Thornhill led a workshop with volunteers, asking: *What do we know about Calke in relation to the theme of isolation and loneliness?* Feedback from the volunteers in the form of statements were collected by Alison and fed into the research and analysis process.

## Strategic Workshop 2

Situated at the very end of the research process but prior to any findings being finalised, Strategic Workshop 2 involved a wider range of staff and volunteers from Calke along with the RCMG team and was intended to enable the whole workshop team to explore the research and develop the key findings together. Kate Jopling, author of the Jo Cox Commission report on loneliness, unable to attend in person, was able to complete an interview beforehand and key recordings capturing her thoughts were fed into the Workshop. For clarity, Day 1 was approached as input – feeding in the contents of the working papers, visitor research and volunteer feedback – and Day 2 was approached as time for analysis and development. Analysis and development were aided by a series of creative activities and the use of a pre-prepared and propositional 'emergent framework' (Figure 1) around and against which discussion could be generated.

During Workshop 2, an emergent framework for the project was tested with participants and found to offer a useful mechanism for conceptualising Calke's work around loneliness and social isolation.

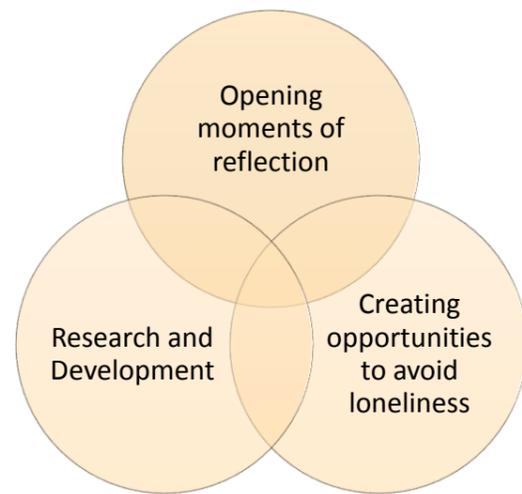


Figure 1a – Emergent Framework

The emergent framework places an emphasis on three overlapping and inter-related areas of activity:

1. working with hand-picked creatives to develop particular interpretive interventions at Calke with the key aim of disrupting the conventional heritage visit and opening up moments of reflection on and awareness of questions of loneliness and social isolation which are felt, physically and emotionally;
2. working to create opportunities for staff, volunteers, visitors and programme participants, to avoid loneliness. Part of this area of activity requires Calke to think deeply about how it could be social in everything it does and how it could manifest its ambition to be welcoming, sociable and prompt small acts of kindness in and through its physical and human resources;
3. ongoing research and development as the Calke team learn more about what matters to them and push their work and capacity forward.

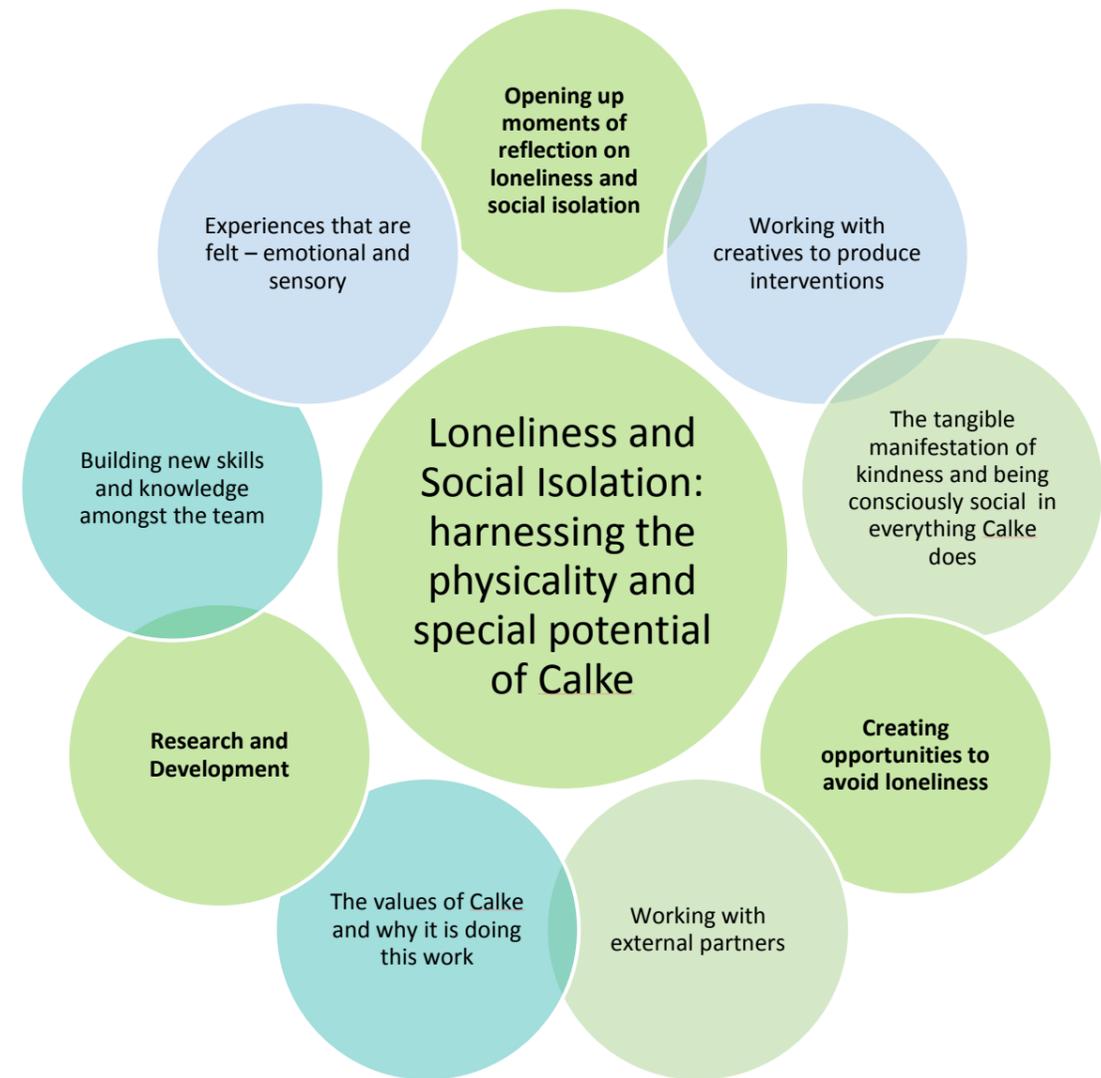


Figure 1b – Emergent Framework



## Key Findings

### Opportunities

The proposal that Calke develop a programme of activity stemming from and connecting with the contemporary issue of loneliness and social isolation is timely, much-needed and has the potential to generate a project from which others will want to learn. Since the project started in October 2017, the Jo Cox Commission has published its report on loneliness and the UK government has appointed its first ever Minister for Loneliness, a signal of the importance and scale of the issue.

Whilst a range of sectors (government, business, health and community organisations) are perceived to be engaging with and have potential to contribute to the prevention of loneliness, the cultural sector is strangely absent from discussions and reports (Jo Cox Commission 2018). Calke has an opportunity to show how, in very practical ways, cultural organisations can get involved. Cultural organisations are uniquely placed to model forms of human interaction required in the fight against loneliness and to open up thoughtful reflection on the world in which we live and the ways in which so many people are struggling to build relationships and meaning. Indeed, cultural organisations can respond by working to enable profound and deeply social opportunities for experience and action which, in their own small ways, are more powerful than even the most vocal of campaigns. In this sense, the project opens up the possibility for Calke to develop a programme of events and ways of working which will be of great interest across the cultural sector.

The project also sits comfortably within the National Trust's ambition to Move, Teach, and Inspire, especially in relation to improving interpretive experiences and provoking visitors, staff and volunteers to think differently about the world around them.

Finally, the project will open up opportunities to build local links and generate long-lasting relationships with local groups. This could be as simple as making space available at Calke to enrich the experiences of local groups already working in this area, but could also be about working in partnership on a whole range of projects from small, targeted programmes to major co-production activities. It is clear that the team at Calke need to start with a workable and manageable set of activities and so the Plan for Stage 2 at the end of this report sets out a number of combinations and routes to development.



*'Why people are visiting the Park? Some are carers and come for a break.'*

*Calke volunteer*

### Pitfalls: a note of caution

The project was commissioned by Calke based on an understandable and thoughtful caution about venturing in to a field of work, areas of which clearly demand specialist expertise. Loneliness is a deep social problem and the emotional and subjective nature of loneliness means that strategies and solutions for people who are suffering from acute loneliness will be specific to the individual. To begin to work with people struggling with loneliness demands an ongoing commitment and anyone working in this space needs to ask themselves how they will both draw in the relevant expertise and sustain this work.

Throughout the research process (in Workshop 1, in the Working Papers and in Workshop 2) questions were raised by participants about the appropriateness of undertaking this work to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Henry Harpur Crewe and then moving to a different theme in 2020. These questions were raised in full recognition of the need for cultural organisations to make a sustained commitment to shaping the world around them and in recognition of the time and energy that would be required from the team at Calke and any partner organisations, to develop a meaningful and impactful programme. It was possible to see how Calke might seek to raise awareness of loneliness and social isolation, and encourage small acts of kindness for a year, but any more substantial programming and engagement with people struggling with loneliness, would demand a longer-term commitment and sustained partnership working. There are, however, contributions that would work well as a year-long programme and which we feel would also provide Calke with some new ways of working and approaches which could then have a much longer life and even build towards more focused partnerships and programming if the commitment to this issue continued. These approaches are set out in the Planning for Stage 2 section at the end of this report.

## Loneliness and social isolation: the facts

Although often conflated, loneliness, social isolation and solitude are distinct concepts. Solitude is the state of being alone, and historically has been considered both a boon and a curse, with some people choosing solitude as ‘a respite from the stresses of life, for quiet contemplation, to foster creative impulses, or to commune with nature’ (Coplan and Bowker 2014: 3). Despite the many associated benefits, a social and cultural stigma surrounds deciding to isolate oneself from society (Averill and Sundararajan 2014: 92-93).

Loneliness, on the other hand, is a state of mind. Loneliness is subjective, it is emotional, the felt experience of an individual, the negative and unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It takes place when there is a mismatch or perceived gap between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have and those which we would like or expect to have (Perlman and Peplau 1981; Bolton 2012; Cutler 2012).

Social isolation is the absence of social contact, an objective state which is measured through the number of contacts that someone has. Social isolation can contribute to loneliness, but there is not always a link because people can feel lonely even if they have contact with family and friends; other people might have few contacts and not feel lonely (Bolton 2012; Cutler 2012). It is therefore possible to be isolated without being lonely, and to be lonely without being isolated.

As Jo Cox powerfully puts it – ‘loneliness doesn’t discriminate’, it can affect anyone; cutting across ages, demographics and economic contexts. Two in three people know someone who is lonely (Campaign to End Loneliness) and over nine million adults are often or always lonely (British Red Cross and Co-op 2016). Loneliness is a natural part of the human condition, with most of us feeling lonely at some point during our lives. However, where it becomes an issue is when it becomes acute; an ongoing, grinding and deeply painful felt experience (Jopling 2018). In these instances, loneliness can be harmful to both our physical and mental health.

Loneliness is a comparable risk factor for early death to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is worse for us than other well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity (Holt-Lunstad and Layton 2010). Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26% (Holt-Lunstad et. al 2015), as well as increasing the risk of high blood pressure (Hawkey et. al 2010). A lack of social connections and experiencing acute loneliness increases the onset of disability (Lund et. al 2010), and puts us at greater risk of cognitive decline (James et. al 2011). Lonely people are also 64% more likely to develop clinical dementia (Holwerda et. al 2012). Loneliness isn’t actually a mental

‘Some recent surveys have uncovered levels of loneliness across all ages that are worryingly high. What we don’t yet know is if this is a sign of a growing problem, or because efforts to breakdown the stigma of loneliness are working, making people more willing to acknowledge their loneliness. Whichever it is, there is much to do.’

Jo Cox Commission 2018

‘Loneliness is a comparable health risk to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.’

Campaign to End Loneliness

health condition in itself, but social isolation and chronic loneliness can evoke feelings of depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions. Lonely individuals are more prone to depression (Cacioppo et al. 2006; Green et. al 1992), and loneliness and low social interaction are predictive of suicide in older age (O'Connell et. al 2004). Loneliness can lead to an increase in unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking, substance abuse, and poor diet, creating a vicious cycle, where people are even less inclined to get involved in social situations, lose confidence, and progressively become more physically unwell (Jopling 2015 following Goll et. al; Jo Cox Commission 2018; Derby Women's Centre).

Although loneliness can touch us all, there are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of experiencing loneliness, which make some groups of people more at risk. The causes of loneliness are complex, but chronic loneliness can be triggered by transitions and changes in people's lives. These can include: 'moving home, changing schools, coming to the country seeking asylum, leaving the armed forces, developing a health condition, leaving care, becoming a carer, becoming a parent, changing jobs or leaving work, experiencing family breakdown and bereavement' (Jo Cox Commission 2018: 10).

While we should not assume that all people going through a particular life circumstance or transition will experience loneliness as a result, we should be aware that there is a real stigma surrounding loneliness (Goodman et. al 2015: 4), meaning that many individuals find it difficult to admit to feeling lonely, not only to themselves, but to others. Recent research by the Campaign to End Loneliness found that a staggering 92% of people find it difficult to tell others they are lonely. The reasons for this stigma relate to a fear of being negatively judged (eight in ten people) and a belief that others will think there is something wrong with them (33% of people) (Campaign to End Loneliness). Because of this many individuals feel unable to ask for help, or readily reveal their needs (Jopling 2015 following Griffin 2010). This, and the fact that many, but not all, lonely people are also socially isolated, acts as a real barrier and makes them exceptionally difficult to identify and reach (Jopling 2015 following Victor et. al 2009). Explicit targeting is therefore required, but caution must be taken to avoid presenting opportunities as being 'solutions to loneliness' or framed as 'programmes for lonely people'. Given its nature as subjective, experiences of loneliness are deeply personal and individual, meaning that the most effective way to tackle chronic loneliness is to provide a service which firstly draws out and then responds to individual needs (Jopling 2015: 20). This challenging work requires individuals and organisations, with significant expertise and highly specialist skills, to proactively outreach.

*'Over 9 million adults are often or always lonely.'*

British Red Cross and Co-op 2016

*'92% of us find it difficult to tell others they are lonely.'*

Campaign to End Loneliness

*'Cross team volunteer buddies? Some colleagues work in isolation.'*

Calke volunteer

Increasingly, a more holistic and integrated approach is being taken, where organisations and agencies work together to not only combat loneliness, *but to endeavour to prevent it*. Preventative action is less challenging than working with people who are already acutely lonely, and recent research suggests that even thin social ties and small acts of kindness can make a difference in avoiding loneliness (Jopling 2018), for example, simply taking time to chat with a neighbour or stopping to have a conversation with someone in a supermarket.

Raising awareness of the worrying levels of loneliness across all ages, the Jo Cox Commission report encourages us all to think more consciously about our social connections and to talk more openly about the issue of loneliness. This in turn will begin to break down the stigma surrounding loneliness. As the report's title compellingly puts forward: 'Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time', individuals and organisations are prompted to take action, no matter how big or small. They suggest that:

'We all have a role to play. Tackling loneliness starts with:

**Taking care of ourselves** – We need to check our relationship balances at least as often as we check our bank balances, and think about whether we've got the connections we need to keep us going. Is there any more we can do to make sure we maintain the relationships that sustain us, or to build new relationships when others fall away?

**Taking care of others** – We all need to think about our families, neighbours and wider communities, and consider who may be feeling lonely. What can we do to reach out and help others feel connected – maybe it's as simple as letting people know we are 'happy to chat'?

**Creating Connection-friendly communities** – Community and voluntary sector groups have a responsibility to make sure that their work helps people to connect and build relationships. This might be about developing new services, and building the evidence for what works in tackling loneliness. Or it might be as simple as making sure everyone feels welcome in your group, and making special effort to help those who might need a bit of extra support to take the first step in joining in' (Jo Cox Commission 2018: 21).



Derek's top ten tips to feeling less lonely:

1. *Make an effort to make new friends.*
2. *Join a hobbies club.*
3. *Visit your local community or resource centre and find out what's on offer.*
4. *Learn to use a computer at your local library.*
5. *Seek help from your local social services.*
6. *Consider taking in a lodger or paying guest.*
7. *Use your telephone more often to contact people; don't wait for people to contact you.*
8. *Contact friends and relatives you haven't spoken to recently.*
9. *Make friends with your neighbours.*
10. *Do voluntary work if you are able to.*

Derek, who is in his early 90s, got involved with his local Age-friendly Project in Old Moat, Greater Manchester through attending consultation events and participating in workshops, later becoming an Age-friendly Champion for this work. He decided to write a set of ten top tips for reducing loneliness, introducing simple things he does to keep himself active and connected (Age-Friendly Manchester).

A photograph of the interior of a rustic wooden building. The walls are made of dark wood and light-colored plaster. In the foreground, a large, bleached bull skull with long, curved horns is mounted on a wooden frame. To the left, a landscape painting is displayed on a wooden easel, showing a green field, a tree, and a small figure. In the foreground, there is a large, circular, metal object, possibly a stove or a pot. The floor is made of stone or brick. The lighting is dim, creating a somber and isolated atmosphere.

*'You're talking isolation here,  
you couldn't get more isolated I  
don't think.'*

*Bruce, visitor to Calke*

### The uniqueness of Calke: site

As the research progressed, it became very clear that in relation to the theme of loneliness and social isolation and the potential to generate opportunities for reflection, action and expression, the physicality of the site is equally as important to opening up these opportunities, as key stories, such as the story of 'The Isolated Baronet'. The quality of the site at Calke is incredible and although it also has other kinds of interpretive potential, it lends itself exceptionally well as a place in which a more reflective mode of being, might, at key moments, be prioritised and enabled.

During the research, a number of observations were made about the physical site and its interpretive potential which began to take on great significance.

### Repetition

At first, a visit to Calke might be interpreted as a kind of repetition. Experience after experience of gardens, buildings, interiors and objects in varying states of disrepair and abandonment can feel as though it lacks variation and leave visitors feeling confused. As the research progressed however, it became clear that this sense of repetition is, in fact, a key characteristic of Calke and is a great asset. Every trace of the past matters at Calke – it is rich in its sense of the passing of time – and if interpreted and framed in the right way, can open up a way of being, seeing and feeling that is fundamentally different to many other National Trust properties or heritage visits. It is perhaps more focused, more inward and more reflective. No single element or object is the star (odd moments in the visit such as the display of the State Bed challenge this approach, though in potentially rather interesting ways), and this multiplicity in the physical site, does have great potential as a route to encouraging the opening up of multiple subjectivities, or ways of being, in visitors. As the visitor research made clear, for some visitors this happens through their engagement with the site – visitors made links to loved ones they had lost, to questions of mental health, and to their experiences as a carer. For others however, a clearer framing of and additional structures to support engagement with these qualities of the site and the experiential possibilities they might open up (what are we meant to do here? how are we meant to behave? how might we understand the things that we experience?), will be needed.

### Fragments and gaps

A key observation on the site is that as a visitor, we never fully grasp the entirety of the site or gain a full view of the site. The house is hidden from us from the very start and even if we do venture out towards the grotto and look back to view the house in its entirety, our view is still partial and side on. Calke is characterised by fragmentation, not just in the fragments of the past that make up the place, but in the larger structure



*'We went out the library then we actually went into another room and then all of a sudden where the carpet finished it was then another world...'*

*Maureen, visitor to Calke*

*'Being in the woods with only the sound of nature is good for the soul. Positive isolation.'*

*Calke volunteer*

*'There is an area in the parkland overlooking Middle Lodge from the woodland – leaning on the five bar gate .... The peace and tranquillity takes over and all is OK with the world!!!'*

*Calke volunteer*

and visitor experience. Similar to the comments above on repetition, this has its challenges in terms of the visitor experience – it is a challenge to the norm – but also great potential and speaks to ideas in much recent museum literature around the power of fragments, of the unfinished and of gaps in understanding, in fuelling our imagination and emotions (Working Paper 3). Recognising this quality and protecting and nurturing this quality is clearly important.

#### Nature

The setting for all of the above is natural and a large number of visitors commented on the isolated nature of Calke, physically removed from the world around it, and the peace and wellbeing that comes from spending time in its landscape. Volunteers report that a number of people come and walk at Calke because they feel safe there and being in certain parts of the landscape seem to open up moments of particular peace and wellbeing for different people. Key here is Calke as a resource for people to return to time and again and the kinds of feelings and ways of being that being in the landscape and looking on to the landscape, seem to engender.

#### Corridors and tunnels

A unique feature of the site at Calke is the range of spaces that you find yourself moving through as a visitor – from rolling landscape, to formal gardens, from once stately rooms, to empty corridors, from winding pathways to hidden tunnels, and from the grotto to the ice house. The range is incredible. Visitors are interested in these diverse spaces and what happened here – they appreciate that the spaces have the potential to transport them to another time and place, to another world.

#### Thresholds and significant moments of change or decision-making

Beyond the perception of sameness and repetition and linked to the fragmentation of Calke, it is very clear that there are key moments of change and/or decision-making in the visit. In the house, one moment of change might be the sudden change between the Boudoir and the Yellow room, where faded opulence turns to decay. Similarly, in the gardens the large number of gates and doorways which invite us to step through to something unknown on the other side, add to the mystery of Calke and prompt our curiosity. To some extent we are an explorer at Calke, always discovering something new and Calke's strategy of leaving the site as it is and encouraging discovery and roaming by leaving doors open in order to leave space for exploration and imagination, is magical and incredibly rare. All of these feelings of possibility and the potential for exploration are heightened by the lack of visibility and continual moving through thresholds.



Similarly, other physical points in the visitor journey such as arrival in the stable yard or down in front of the house, offer up moments of decision-making. Simple signage has been used extremely effectively in a number of these places across the site to lightly and in careful, unobtrusive ways, provide information at these key points – the chalk boards have a lovely quality but so do the Perspex onto brick signs.

Whereas many National Trust properties are challenged with how they might stimulate curiosity or engender an exploratory mode, at Calke, for some visitors, this is already stimulated by the physicality of the site. For others however, such modes of engagement and experience need to be encouraged, enabled and supported – visitors need permission to explore.

*'In the dining room there's 20 chairs, but there's only two of you, you'd feel lonely, you'd be aware of what you'd lost or the connections you didn't have.'*

*Chris, visitor to Calke*

*'They've obviously got a lot of restoration to do, you know paintwork... but I hope they don't make it too modern.'*

*Frances, visitor to Calke*

## The uniqueness of Calke: story

Since Calke was taken over by the National Trust in 1985, the particular qualities of the site – its state of disrepair and decay – have been associated with stories of the decline of the great country houses as well as evocative and curious stories of isolation which have circulated around key members of the Harpur Crewe family, most notably Henry Harpur Crewe, 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet and Sir Vauncey Harpur Crewe, 10<sup>th</sup> Baronet. These stories have been passed on in the oral histories told about Calke and in National Trust guidebooks.

The overarching story of isolation at Calke is often seen to begin with Henry and his perceived dislike of society and human contact has been applied as a lens to Calke to reveal more stories of isolation and loneliness down the male family line. Henry Harpur Crewe, 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet of Calke, reportedly ostracised himself from polite society by marrying a lady's maid. Henry is described as eating alone, though with the table set for company and as communicating with his servants by note (Barber 2016: 10). Sir Vauncey, the 10<sup>th</sup> Baronet, is also described as preferring isolation – it was Sir Vauncey who added the taxidermy collections to Calke which are, for so many people, bound up in associations of Calke with obsessions and a turn away from life. As the Guidebook states: 'He fled at the first sign of anyone visiting and did not reappear until the intruders were gone' (Barber 2016: 16). Although the lack of deep understanding and distinction between key stories means that visitors often conflate the various members of the Harpur Crewe family, at one level, the oral, curious and very human nature of these stories should be celebrated,.

That said, stories expressed verbally often seem to take on a different character once they are committed to print, perhaps as a result of an expectation that print will be historically accurate or that it speaks for the National Trust, rather than being the understanding, memory or anecdote of an individual. Additionally, and reflecting on what we know now about loneliness and social isolation, the way in which the Harpur Crewe family is described is rather judgmental and could be interpreted as extending the stigma that exists around these issues. For example, in the National Trust Guidebook, the account of Sir Henry is depicted as where the 'legends of Calke's reclusive family begin' (Barber 2016: 10). Later, his 'taste for solitude' is rather problematically described as 'morbid' (Barber 2016: 10). The Guidebook uncritically references material from the diarist Joseph Farington, who reported that Henry's 'shyness is a disease of the mind' (Farington cited in Barber 2016: 11), described Sir John Harpur Crewe 9<sup>th</sup> Baronet as 'marked' by 'a resurgence of the Harpur gene that shunned society and indulged personal passions' (Barber 2016: 14) for his reluctance to assume public office, and later labelled Georgina's (Sir Henry Harpur, 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet's



With peeling  
paintwork and  
overgrown courtyards,  
Calke Abbey  
tells the story of the  
dramatic decline of a  
grand country house  
estate,

*'The family told people to keep out.'*

*Calke volunteer*

*'The Harpur Crewe family liked to be isolated.'*

*Calke volunteer*

granddaughter) children as having 'a double dose of Harpur eccentricity unsettling their senses' (Barber 2016: 15). This lack of a critical frame runs the risk of perpetuating simplistic and negative stereotypes, and further stigmatising individuals who choose to isolate themselves, wish for solitude, or simply do not fit societal 'norms'.

As the research progressed, it also became clear that the stories which circulate around 'The Isolated Baronet' and which refer to his solitude and perceived lack of social skill and interaction, are questioned by other stories which seem to suggest a man engaged in a range of public roles. Linked to this, a number of visitors, volunteers and outside participants in the research raised the question of servants at the site. Calke has a number of physical features (not least its tunnels) which meant that servants were, as one volunteer put it, 'not seen'. Servants would have moved to Calke from their homes and undoubtedly would have experienced loneliness to differing degrees. Staff living at Calke today could clearly identify with these experiences and were aware that there are opportunities to share some of these stories in ways which open up a greater understanding of a wider range of people who have lived, and continue to live, at Calke.

Clearly, there is a need for some new ways of talking, particularly in print, about the people who lived at Calke. How might new research and thinking at Calke open up new ways of framing the stories which circulate around the Harpur Crewe family? How might we utilise questions to problematize the stories told at Calke and open them up to greater interpretation? And might these new, perhaps more open and complex ways of talking, open up new possibilities for research and storytelling at the site?

*'At other National Trust properties you see a snapshot, a couple of rooms in the house in different times in history. This is more of a snapshot of a family... it's how real people left their room.'*

*Chris, visitor to Calke*



*'I noticed that when we went around there was loads of souvenir type things, like shells and birds that I didn't understand the background of. Like hoarders. Like why have they done that?'*

*Marie, visitor to Calke*

*'One of the ladies (volunteer) did say perhaps there was possibly Asperger's syndrome ... and they do have a tendency to not talk to people and collect things.'*

*Jayne, visitor to Calke*

# Planning for Stage 2

## Opening up moments of reflection on and awareness of contemporary questions of loneliness and social isolation

There is a real *stigma* surrounding loneliness, meaning that many individuals find it difficult to admit to feeling lonely, not only to themselves, but to others. *Talking about loneliness* is key to tackling loneliness. A key part of our Strategy is to generate debate by providing a platform for discussion and deep reflection.

- Generating debate
- Providing a platform for discussion
- Posing questions
- Chalk boards and other small text-based interventions around the site – start a conversation about loneliness and isolation in response to the spirit of this place
- Events – hosting talks
- Work with hand-picked creatives to respond to Calke and create a small number of powerful and evocative installations which prompt reflection on contemporary questions of social isolation and loneliness
- Co-production of creative interventions

## Creating opportunities to avoid loneliness

In relation to loneliness and social isolation, *prevention* is key and small interventions and moments of empowerment can have big impacts. A key part of the Strategy is to embed opportunities for visitors, volunteers, staff and a range of people working with local organisations, to *build 'thin ties'* and enable others to do the same. This has great potential to be embedded across the visitor experience and in a whole range of projects.

- A warm welcome for everyone – modelling inclusive behaviour across all areas of work
- Being sociable in everything we do – what might this mean?
- Recognition that some people come alone to Calke because they feel safe here
- Chatty Cafe – the addition of 'Chatter and Natter' tables at key points during the visit
- Rewriting the Guidebook to remove judgemental language and stigma
- Directing existing programming at groups already working with people at risk from loneliness and social isolation in order to share the wellbeing benefits of Calke with others
- Making space at Calke available to specific local and community groups in order to enrich their ongoing activities
- Introduce a buddy system for new volunteers
- Introduce more opportunities for teamworking – volunteering can sometimes be too solitary an experience
- Introducing support for individuals as they transition out of volunteering – a volunteer alumni scheme
- Encouraging visitors to take action – small acts of kindness which can make a big difference by using the simple card system (other opportunities will follow once we start!)

## Research and development

As the team at Calke works through the outcomes from this research and plans the work that will take place at Stage 2 of the project, there is clearly significant potential *for organisational learning and capacity building* from internal sharing and innovation, to working with and learning from others, undertaking new research, and planning in targeted professional development opportunities.

- Form a steering group
- Identify internal champions to drive Calke's work around loneliness and social isolation
- Professional development – targeted visits to see how others are working
- Build new skills and knowledge amongst the team
- Consolidate research about the people who lived at Calke and identify new areas of research
- Building understanding of local groups and how Calke can work with them
- Building a deeper understanding of visitors – becoming experts in who visits, who doesn't, and how Calke can develop an in-depth understanding of the visitor experience
- Increasing understanding of Calke's values and what matters to the people who work there

## Leading-edge approaches to interpretation

Part of the research involved identification and analysis of leading-edge approaches to interpretation at historic sites and beyond which might be of significance to Calke and particularly in relation to loneliness and social isolation. A whole series of examples of interpretation were drawn together and a number of key themes emerged: explore not tell; imagination and experiences that are felt; qualities of the ephemeral, the partial and lightness of touch; authenticity; working with hand-picked creatives; and calls to action.

### Explore not tell

A key observation on leading edge approaches to interpretation and one that is backed up by museum research around learning and experience is the call to 'explore not tell'. Questioning the tendency in cultural organisations to produce panels of information and detail for visitors, the idea of explore not tell challenges us to think about how we might, rather, enable visitors to explore for themselves and access information on their own terms. This demands the curation of landscapes full of potential.

### Imagination and experiences that are felt

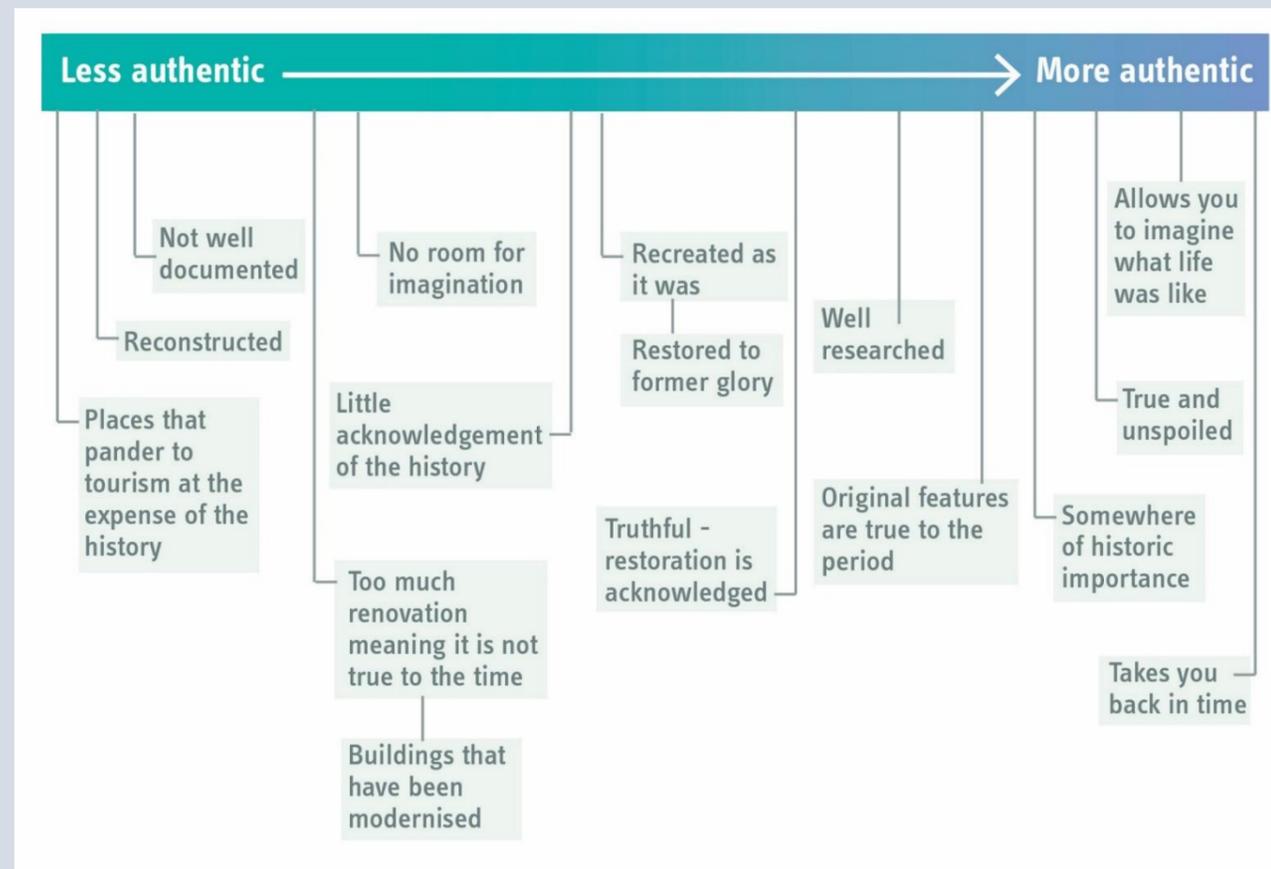
Part of this recognition of visitors as learners on their own independent learning and experiential journeys also links to our second observation on leading-edge interpretive practice which demands that interpretation prioritises the feeling, sensing and thinking human being. If we feel something we are more likely to be engaged, transported to another place or another idea. As Susannah Lipscomb has written, 'visitors need to be able to glimpse, taste, and feel the past in experiences that work intellectually, emotionally, and physically' (Lipscomb 2010: 111). Interestingly, in relation to the theme of loneliness and social isolation, most people have some experience upon which they can draw – loneliness is a universal human feeling.

### Ephemeral, partial, lightness of touch

Linked to both of the characteristics above, many examples of leading edge interpretation exhibit an ephemeral quality or a lightness of touch that suggest and open up, rather than close down, new interpretive possibilities. Examples such as the reinterpretation of Kew Palace in 2006 and interpretation printed on to fabric as well as some elements within the *Young Henry VIII Story* at Hampton Court Palace, convey stories and content but with an openness, flexibility and sense of humanity which is then directly picked up in the visitor experience. Calke has a particular advantage here in that the site is characterised by fragmentation and elements of the interpretation at the site – particularly the chalk boards – instinctively harness this partiality.



Brickworks Museum, Zehdenick. Image: Duncan McCauley



What makes a visitor experience more or less authentic? Morris Hargreaves McIntyre

### Authenticity

To connect visitors emotionally, visitors must feel that their experience is authentic and increasing amounts of research have begun to engage with questions of authenticity which can, if approached in too simplistic a way, be assumed to relate to the quality and philosophy of restoration or the original (untouched, unmodified) state of a building or landscape. In fact, recent research challenges these assumptions and enables us to see that the most authentic places and experiences are those which trigger imagination and emotion, experiences that are felt. Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) recently commissioned a piece of research around authenticity which usefully draws much recent research together into a simple model (above). Whilst the model shows that emotional

engagement is key, it is also clear that stories (particularly human stories) matter more than detailed information. That said, research and accuracy are also expected and are clearly linked to the trust that visitors place in cultural organisations to curate and open up experiences for them.

### Working with hand-picked creatives

All of the examples of interpretation we explored in Working Paper 3 and during Workshop 2 involved working with hand-picked creatives – artists, graphic designers, architects, film-makers, theatre groups, and others. In each case, significant steps were taken to work through a process of careful selection and briefing – all the projects exhibited a tight fit between the selected creatives and the ambitions and intent

of the cultural organisation. The projects reached across a whole range of budgets and some of the most compelling projects were delivered by young creatives at the start of their careers.

### Calls to action

One example which generated a good deal of positive response and discussion amongst Workshop 2 participants was drawn from *Lost Childhoods*, an exhibition at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) in the United States which was co-produced with a large community group of over 100 young people transitioning out of foster care, carers, agencies and youth advocates. The exhibition is a lovely example of a museum giving up its space and skills in exhibition making, to support a group of young people to say what they wanted to say about their experiences, worries, hopes and dreams. Alongside objects, photography, films and personal journals, were exhibited works created by artists working with the young people. One work, a tapestry containing small thoughts and messages from the young people was later turned into a simple rack of cards which listed a range of ways in which visitors could support children in or transitioning out of foster care. On the backs of the cards were instructions on how to act. Right at the leading-edge of participatory practice, the card system shows how, when deeply embedded in a project, simple techniques can be used to empower visitors to act and make a change. The idea of the call to action and simple ways to empower visitors to do small things in order to effect big changes, is clearly of great relevance to Calke's work around loneliness and social isolation.

## Visitor Research

Over two days in October 2017, RCMG conducted semi-structured interviews at Calke with 43 adult visitors in order to build on the visiting member data collected by Calke and develop a more nuanced understanding of the current visitor experience in relation to the themes of loneliness and isolation. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was carried out with the visitors in the way that they had visited, for example – individually, in couples, and in small groups of family and friends. Coincidentally, all who participated in the visitor research were National Trust members. There was a range of ages, but the majority were retired. Interviewees also came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, however, there was a lack of ethnic diversity – all were white and British. Several visitors had come to Calke whilst on holiday, a small number had not visited before, and some were local to Calke and had visited on several occasions. The interviews revealed a number of key findings:

### Unique and immersive experience

Visitors had overwhelmingly positive experiences of Calke. Most of the visitors interviewed remarked on the ‘specialness’ of Calke, recognising it as different from most National Trust properties, and although some respondents could not always easily articulate their experience in relation to the themes of loneliness and isolation, others used highly emotive language to describe the immersive ‘feel of the place’. For some visitors this was an unexpected surprise, for others it was the main reason they came, and for most people it was an important part of their visit.

### Isolation and loneliness

Many visitors responded to the themes of loneliness and isolation by talking about the physical nature of the site. The long drive and expansive parkland, the isolated and hidden estate, and the secluded house down in a hollow were often mentioned as memorable parts of the visit, particularly in relation to where they experienced feelings of isolation. Other visitors described their experiences in the house, expressing how the dark, long corridors and tunnels made them think about what it would have been like to work at Calke, questioning whether the servants would have felt lonely. Some visitors saw the rooms in disrepair with abandoned and stacked furniture as a metaphor for the Harpur Crewes’ psychological state, drawing parallels between rooms being shut down and withdrawing in on oneself. A number of visitors also made connections with contemporary issues of loneliness and social isolation, in some cases talking about loved ones’ and friends’ experiences of feeling alone.

*‘Don’t collect quite so much clutter because you don’t want to wind up with your house being like this with stuff in every room. This guy clearly had a problem. He’s a bit of a kleptomaniac, keeping hold and hoarding things. I get the impression that he had some sort of mental problem that he perhaps needed to have addressed.’*

*Grenville, visitor to Calke*

### Collecting and hoarding

The wealth and expanse of collections were consistently remarked upon, with comments appearing in most interviews. A number of visitors were uncomfortable, in particular, with the natural heritage collections, finding them 'disturbing' and unsure of why they were collected in the amounts they were. Some visitors described the collection as a form of 'hoarding', finding it obsessive and making connections to the reclusive nature of the family, whilst others saw it as a 'passion', with one visitor pondering whether the family's energy went in to this, perhaps, over socialising.

### An emotive experience

Several visitors connected to the spirit and essence of Calke emotionally. Visitors often recalled and relished specific details linked to the stories of the Harpur Crewes, talking about the site as being 'more human' or reflecting 'the human condition'. Calke was described intimately as having a sense of 'sadness', where strong, visceral feelings were evoked, with words and phrases such as – 'neglect', 'loss', 'decline', 'rise and fall', and 'emptiness' used. One visitor found Calke 'creepy' and 'uncanny', and many thought of it as a catalyst for the imagination, seeing the huge potential in the site.

### Decline of the country house and estate

A large number of visitors spoke about their fascination with Calke's dilapidation, finding it poignant and intriguing at the same time. One visitor asked whether Calke was 'idyllic or a prison?', whilst another described it as a 'noose around your neck', particularly reflecting on the impact of inheritance tax on the family's situation. Many remarked on Calke as an opportunity to see what it really would have been like, rather than the 'usual National Trust pristine, lavish house of the rich and privileged'.

### Confusion

Although visitors took delight in the unique nature of Calke, several were confused about what they were seeing. There was some misunderstanding around the philosophy of preserve and present as found, with a number of visitors believing that Calke was in a process of restoration or had run out of funds to complete the renovation. One visitor believed the State Bed to be the focal point of the whole site, noticing how it had been maintained and displayed in a completely different way to the rest of the house. In many instances visitors mixed up and conflated members of the Harpur Crewe family. One visitor also questioned the dominant narrative of an isolated and withdrawn family, after seeing a photo of the last occupant – Henry Harpur Crewe – meeting with Nancy Reagan and being dressed in a 'nice suit', later going on to describe this as 'incongruous' and not being able to 'comprehend it'.



# Local and national associations and potential partners

Action for Children (<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/>)

British Red Cross (<http://www.redcross.org.uk/>)

Amber Trust ([www.ambertrust.co.uk](http://www.ambertrust.co.uk))

Age UK (<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/>)

Alzheimer's Society (<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/>)

Campaign to End Loneliness (<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>)

Carers UK (<https://www.carersuk.org/>)

Community Directory Derbyshire  
([www.communitydirectoryderbyshire.org.uk](http://www.communitydirectoryderbyshire.org.uk))

Contact the Elderly (<http://www.contact-the-elderly.org.uk/>)

Co-op (<https://www.coop.co.uk/>)

CVS South Derbyshire (<https://sd cvs.org.uk/>)

Derbyshire Carers Association (<https://www.derbyshirecarers.co.uk/>)

Derbyshire Mental Health Services  
([www.derbyshirementalhealthservices.nhs.uk](http://www.derbyshirementalhealthservices.nhs.uk))

Derbyshire Mind (<http://www.derbyshiremind.org.uk/>)

Derby Women's Centre (<http://www.derby-womenscentre.org.uk>)

Hadhari Project  
(<http://www.communitydirectoryderbyshire.org.uk/view/3012/hadhari-project>)

Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre Headley Court  
(<http://www.headleysurrey.org.uk/hc.htm>)

Home to Home Calls (<http://www.hometohomecalls.com/>)

Independent Age (<https://www.independentage.org>)

Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness  
(<https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/loneliness>)

Kate Jopling, Policy and Strategy Consultant  
(<https://www.linkedin.com/in/kate-jopling-69503328/>)

Junior Vision Ambassadors – Vision Support and Primary Hearing Support,  
Special Education Needs and Disability Support Service, Leicester City Council  
([www.leicester.gov.uk](http://www.leicester.gov.uk))

Mental Health Action Group ([www.mhag.org.uk](http://www.mhag.org.uk))

Refugee Action (<https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/>)

Rethink ([www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org))

Royal Voluntary Service (<https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk>)

Sense (<https://www.sense.org.uk/>)

The Silver Line (<https://www.thesilverline.org.uk/>)

Women's Institute (<https://www.thewi.org.uk/>)

YMCA (<https://www.ymca.org.uk/>)

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## Examples of practice in museums, galleries, cultural organisations and heritage sites

The majority of programmes, activities, integrated services and opportunities for lonely people in museums, galleries and the wider cultural sector are focused on reaching lonely and isolated older people. There are some exceptions to this including *The Big Lunch* at The Eden Project, the *Community Programme* at Pallant House, and *if:volunteering for wellbeing* across several cultural institutions in Manchester. The information found in this section has been gathered directly from the organisations' website or via the National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing (<http://museumsandwellbeing.org/>).

<p><i>Evergreen Gardeners</i> at Geffrye Museum <i>Isolated older people experiencing health issues</i></p> <p>Using the museum gardens as inspiration, this monthly club for isolated and vulnerable older adults and their carers aims to encourage lifelong learning, reconnect people with the natural world and contribute to each individual's sense of wellbeing. Activities are carefully designed so they are accessible for people with physical and sensory disabilities; content varies from planting, growing and baking, to ceramics, printing and crafts.</p> <p><a href="https://www.geffrye-museum.org.uk/learning/community-outreach/older-people/evergreen-gardeners/">https://www.geffrye-museum.org.uk/learning/community-outreach/older-people/evergreen-gardeners/</a></p>	<p><i>The Big Lunch</i> at Eden Project <i>Connecting people through community engagement, but not identifying people as lonely</i></p> <p><i>The Big Lunch</i> is a simple idea from the Eden Project – that as many people as possible across the UK have lunch with their neighbours annually on a Sunday in June in a simple act of community, friendship and fun.</p> <p><a href="https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/thebiglunchhomepage">https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/thebiglunchhomepage</a></p>	<p><i>Community Programme</i> at Pallant House <i>Non-labelling approach</i></p> <p>Pallant House Gallery's pioneering <i>Community Programme</i> provides people with disabilities, health issues and those who are isolated with meaningful and long-term opportunities to increase their confidence and improve their health through their interest in art. Importantly, the activities are not labelled as for a specific group, taking in to consideration the stigmatising nature of labelling a person or a group of people based on a single dominant feature or factor in their lives (for example disability, health condition or social circumstance). The programme comprises weekly informal drop-ins as well as structured workshops.</p> <p><a href="http://pallant.org.uk/learning-community/learn/learn/community-programme">http://pallant.org.uk/learning-community/learn/learn/community-programme</a></p>
<p><i>Lost Childhoods</i> at Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History <i>Participatory practice</i></p> <p>The <i>Lost Childhoods</i> exhibition made space and expertise available to support young people transitioning out of foster care to create artworks and an exhibition which said what they wanted to say. It was produced through a complex but effective process which involved forming and working with Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History's (MAH) Creative Community Committee (C3) comprising of foster youth, artists and youth advocates. Meeting at monthly intervals over 6 months, the group worked with staff from MAH and from the Foster Youth Museum. At every stage, efforts were made to ensure that the decision-making process was driven by the young people. The resulting exhibition, beautiful, moving, and empowering, is a direct outcome of the merging of MAH expertise, collections and input from the Foster Youth Museum, co-produced artworks and the voices and experiences of the foster youth themselves.</p> <p><a href="https://santacruzmah.org/2016/lost-childhoods-july-7-2017-december-31-2017/">https://santacruzmah.org/2016/lost-childhoods-july-7-2017-december-31-2017/</a></p>	<p><i>if:Volunteering for wellbeing</i> at a range of Manchester cultural organisations <i>Volunteering</i></p> <p>Since 2006 Manchester Museum and Imperial War Museum (IWM) North have worked in partnership developing innovative volunteer programmes. This inspiring work led way to a new multi-partnership project entitled <i>if:Volunteering for wellbeing</i> (2013 – 2016). The project recruits local people, delivering training and development at Manchester Museum, IWM North and Museum of Science and Industry. Participants receive accredited training, and embark on a 6 to 8 week placement at one of the following venues: People's History Museum, Manchester Jewish Museum, National Trust: Dunham Massey, Manchester City Galleries, the Whitworth and Ordsall Hall. This programme aims to be the first major project to measure the impact of responsible volunteering in the heritage sector, exploring how it can reduce social and economic isolation and improve wellbeing. It will seek to evidence how the programme benefits individuals, organisations and society.</p> <p><a href="http://volunteeringforwellbeing.org.uk/about/">http://volunteeringforwellbeing.org.uk/about/</a></p>	<p><i>Taking a View</i> at Yorkshire Sculpture Park <i>Arts and health programme in partnership with NHS Foundation Trust</i></p> <p>The unique combination of exceptional art and open green spaces makes Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) an ideal place to promote physical and emotional wellbeing. A highly successful partnership has been established with South and West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (SWYPFT) delivering projects such as <i>Taking a View</i> and <i>Vivify</i> for older people with mental health issues. These projects provided gallery and outdoor tours, and practical, creative workshops exploring drawing, collage and sculpture. Independent evaluation demonstrates there is significant therapeutic value in projects which help tackle issues of social isolation; offering opportunities for participants to explore their interests, memories and skills; encouraging self-expression through practical art activities; teaching participants new skills, and helping to improve self-esteem and mood.</p> <p><a href="https://yvsp.org.uk/learning/artandwellbeing">https://yvsp.org.uk/learning/artandwellbeing</a></p>