

Sustainable Arcadias: Reinterpreting Estate Landscapes through Environmental Sustainability and Public Good

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Abstract

The English country house is an undeniable cultural powerhouse and one of the nation's most iconic landmarks. However, it is merely one component of the wider historic estate complex which includes designed parkland surrounded by tenanted and home farms. Yet its twentieth-century preservation was largely driven by a cultural appeal which prioritised the house and collections, thus disentangling the house from its estate landscapes in heritage contexts. This partition has been further reinforced by the authorised heritage discourse and a focus on high art and elite culture which has led to academic and popular meanings of these sites as stagnant emblems of conservative nostalgia.

Contemporary crises including climate change, biodiversity loss, and a rising mental health deficit are key issues both globally and in the United Kingdom, for which land use is essential to addressing. This research provides a systematic study on how landed estates are reconceptualising their landscapes to address these issues. Through qualitative data from stakeholders at key sites across England, this research examines the transition from traditional forms of estate parkland and farmland management towards environmentally-sustainable systems of landscape maintenance, regenerative farming, habitat creation, and rewilding. Furthermore, it analyses how these estate landscapes are being promoted as inclusive and accessible spaces for mentally and physically restorative leisure in tourism contexts.

By shifting the perspective away from the twentieth-century heritage paradigm that centred on the house and its collections, this research reconnects the country house to its historically inextricable estate landscapes. In doing so, it sheds light on how this 'landscape turn' to address critical environmental and social issues problematises entrenched heritage valuations which have defined the country house since it entered the nation's heritage fabric in the twentieth century and revitalises the role of the holistic landed estate in contemporary England.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Disclaimer: While producing this work, the agri-environmental funding schemes available in England were those delivered under the Environmental Land Management system following the Agriculture Act 2020, including Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), Countryside Stewardship (CS), and Landscape Recovery (LR), and may not reflect current policy.

‘The True design then of such Places of Pleasure and Retreat is to sweeten the Fatigues both of the Body and of the Mind, and to recover us to our former Bent of Duty, which is but in some measure to restore Man to his lost Station’

- Timothy Nourse, *An Essay of a Country House in Campania Fœlix* 1706, 3

Chapter 1. Introduction

England's country houses are among the nation's most iconic cultural landmarks. From *Country Life* magazine, decades of period dramas following the acclaimed 1981 television adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, to the twenty-first century *Downton Abbey* boom (Cox 2015), and international gallery exhibitions (National Gallery 2026; MFAH n.d.), the English country house is a cultural force to be reckoned with.

As visitor destinations, their popularity in England is undeniable. Historic Houses, a cooperative which represents over 1,400 independently-owned country houses, receives over 21 million visitors a year across their member properties (Historic Houses 2023a). The National Trust, Europe's largest conservation charity, received 25.9 million visitors between 2024 and 2025 with nine of the top ten visited sites being country houses or historic country parks where the original home has been lost, totalling nearly 4.5 million between those nine alone. According to a report for England's official tourist board, VisitEngland, of 628 historic sites, 38% of all visits in 2024 were to historic houses, defined primarily by manors, country houses and royal residences (BVA-BDRC 2025).

However, despite being iconographic of the televised period drama or as leading figures in the nation's heritage tourism industry, many of these historic houses exist as living entities within the contemporary English landscape through the management of their wider estate land. While these estates are far from being the axes of economic and political authority that they once were (Finch 2019, 87; Worsley 2005, 427-428), they are still deeply embedded in discussions over land use. Excluding National Trust properties, an estimated 30% of England still remains in the hands of the aristocracy and traditional landed gentry (Shrubsole 2022). Despite the tumultuous decline of the economic and political primacy of the landed estate over the twentieth century, this figure is a modest decrease from the 43% cited in the 1883 survey *The Great Landowners of Britain and Ireland* (Finch 2019, 65). Consequently, these historic estates, both charity-operated and independently-owned, are *de facto* situated at the heart of any conversation about land use in England.

In recent years, a number of global challenges have come to the fore in England and across the United Kingdom. Climate change and biodiversity loss is a global crisis with particularly dire ramifications in the UK. The country has suffered some of the highest rates of biodiversity depletion in the world, and the nation's farmland, which stretches over 69% of its landmass, is a significant contributor to greenhouse emissions and biodiversity and habitat loss (Smith *et al.*

2024). Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization, over a billion people globally are suffering from mental health disorders and it is the second largest reason for long-term disability, contributing to substantial health-care costs and economic losses (WHO 2025). In England, an estimated 22.6% of people suffer from mental illness, a steadily rising trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (BMA 2026). In light of emerging research that shows a positive relationship between nature access, mental and physical wellbeing, and increased personal concern for the natural environment, redressing inequalities of access to nature in England has recently become a significant priority for several government agencies (Natural England 2025; Spain 2025; Defra 2019). Thus, as issues which are to be addressed through the reprioritisation of land, landed estates and the country houses at their heart are inextricably bound up in these environmental and social issues.

In contrast to the conservative social and cultural meanings which have hitherto been ascribed to the country house in heritage contexts, this thesis explores how English landed estates have utilised their wider landscapes to confront these contemporary crises. Furthermore, by problematising established, house-focused valuations of these sites as emblems of the nation's cultural heritage from an estate-level perspective, this work serves to reconnect the house to its historically inextricable landscapes.

1.1 Research Context and Aims

Research Context

The idea of the country house as sitting at 'the heart of the "national heritage"' (Mandler 1997, 1) has been the end result of an historical process which Mandler (1997) refers to as the 'fall and rise' of the country house and their latter twentieth-century establishment as a heritage destination. Beginning with the 1937 National Trust Act and subsequent Country Houses Scheme, owners could transfer their stately homes and collections to the National Trust, in lieu of crippling death duties but in exchange for public access (Waterson 1994, 109-112). Historians (Hewison 1987, 68-69; Cornforth 1998, 39) have also cited the 1974 Victoria & Albert Museum exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975* (Strong, Binney & Harris 1974) as a critical turning point in the history and cultural importance of England's estates. Following decades of country house demolitions which continued despite the Trust's intercession, the exhibition called upon Britain to rescue its country houses as artistically, culturally, and nationally significant buildings. In addition to the cultural success of *Destruction*, two other contemporary government strategies served to aid the nation's ailing estates. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1968 (Town and Country Planning Act, 1968) required house owners to

obtain permission for demolition and the creation of the National Heritage Memorial Fund in 1980 provided funding for heritage preservation (Cowell 2008, 123-124). Along with further acquisitions by the National Trust during the period, the country house's shift from home to heritage site had crystallised (Waterson 1994, 196). Moreover, along with increased tourism more generally during the decades of the later twentieth century, country house visiting expanded significantly in the 1980s and by 1993 it was reported that a third of the entire adult population had visited a stately home in the preceding year (Mandler 1997, 411-412).

As a result of the high art, house and contents driven appeal of *Destruction* at the Victoria & Albert Museum and the popularity of the country house visit which prioritised its architecture and collections, the main house became disentangled from the historic parkland and agricultural landscapes which make up the landed estate. As a result, academic and popular perceptions which followed were primarily directed towards the house, rather than the entire estate complex. Following this process of heritage-making and the establishment of the country house visit as a popular practice, associations were made between Britain's country houses, national nostalgia, cultural exclusivity, and conservative ideologies (Hewison 1987; Wright 1985 [2009]). These associations were further substantiated by Laurajane Smith (2006), where they were cited as exemplars of what she refers to as an 'authorised heritage discourse', an interpretive framework which privileges monumentality, expert judgement, intrinsic significance, social consensus and national identity, which has since been reinforced (Smith 2021; Smith 2016; Adams 2013; Watson 2013). Other investigations, including Donington's (2023a) and Bressley's (2013) enquiries into contemporary legacies of slavery in England's country houses, and Fowler's (Fowler 2025; Fowler & Poynting 2024; Fowler 2020) explorations into rural England's colonial past have placed them within a similar, culturally conservative milieu. The most substantial contribution in this line of enquiry was Smith's (2006) *Uses of Heritage*, in which she asserts through visitor survey data collected from six houses in England, that the social value of the country house around the turn of the twenty-first century was, 'to negotiate and embody a sense of historical and social legitimacy for the ruling classes and a sense of what it means to be middle class' (Smith 2006, 160-161).

In light of the chronological gap between *Uses of Heritage* and the present day, this thesis provides a contemporary and necessary systematic study into the impact of the country house's wider estate landscapes in addressing the social and environmental challenges outlined above. In addition, it evaluates changing perceptions of the country house as a visitor attraction and, more specifically, the role of the landscape in tourism contexts. Despite observations that the values expressed by the country house are entrenched in sentimental,

and conservative notions of Englishness, as heritage institutions they have maintained high levels of visitor engagement. In contrast to previous heritage assessments which have operated within a house-focused, twentieth-century framework, a landscape perspective will problematise their findings through the means by which modern estate landscapes are being utilised to create more sustainable and inclusive futures. Thus, this research seeks to reinterpret these estates from a landscape perspective to more accurately situate them within contemporary issues of land use and enquire into their evolution as visitor destinations in their own right, for which the unexpected circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced.

Research Aims

This thesis sets out to argue three interrelated points which align to a broader re-evaluation of these sites that reconnects the country house to its wider, historically significant estate landscapes following their twentieth-century partition in heritage and management contexts. Firstly, it argues that historic estate landscapes of parkland and farmland are being actively transformed and reconceptualised by their managers to address environmental crises of anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss. Secondly, that owners and the public have shifted away from the traditional house tour towards a greater focus on estate parkland as a space for accessible and inclusive public recreation, maintaining their relevance in the twenty-first century and supporting high levels of visitor engagement. Finally, it posits that this turn away from a declining, house-focused perspective of the landed estate signals a significant adaptive shift and problematises entrenched heritage valuations of national nostalgia, social deference, and conservative ideologies.

Originality and Research Contribution

By achieving the aforementioned research aims, this work represents a substantial, original contribution to both academic and popular understandings of the historic landed estate in contemporary contexts. It is the first major enquiry into the role and significance of these estates since Laurajane Smith's *Uses of Heritage* (2006) roughly twenty years ago. Acknowledging the sweeping environmental, socio-cultural, economic and political changes which have taken place in that time, this study is essential for maintaining current and informed perspectives. It is also the first study to explicitly argue for the reconnection of the country house to its wider estate since it became a heritage object in the latter twentieth century. This novel approach in its holistic, landscape-level perspective of the interconnected estate, provides an improved scholarly analysis of these historic sites and the degree to which they remain expressive of the authorised heritage discourse. Thus, this research serves as a necessary investigation into nearly two decades of unchallenged scholarship on England's

country houses and landed estates and establishes a new biographical chapter in the landscape history of the rural English estate.

1.2 Analytical Structure

To achieve the research aims, this thesis is structured thematically to effectively analyse the data collected for this work. However, before exploring the practical and ideological transformations in landscape which this work is centred on, it is necessary to provide the historical and cultural contexts of these spaces as well as the interpretive lens by which they will be assessed. Hence, Chapter 2 covers two key areas of historiographical and theoretical interest. Firstly, it provides an overview of the development of heritage practice and theory, with particular reference to how it has developed in the United Kingdom and the process by which the nation's stately homes entered into its cultural heritage fabric. It also sheds light on how postmodern heritage and museological thought has critiqued and sought to revise dominant heritage values encapsulated within the idea of an authorised heritage discourse, or AHD. Secondly, it provides an historical overview of how the country house industry pivoted in the latter twentieth century, refashioning itself as destinations for cultural tourism in response to financial insecurities and widespread demolitions, giving rise to the 'cult of the country house' and their status as emblematic of the nation's heritage. It also takes an historiographical approach to the concurrent rise of academic literature on the country house and tracks its development from the largely art historical to the social, historical, and interdisciplinary. Finally, it explores current socio-political discourse around changing directives within the country house industry and the National Trust in particular, to situate this work within a popular contemporary context.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach of this research, showing how and why data was collected through the use of interviews. It then provides a survey of the sites consulted for this work along with a review of the criteria for which they were selected to reflect a wider body of rural estates.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6, are structured thematically, centred around key areas of change and evolution in the management and ideological underpinnings of contemporary estate landscapes which have been revealed through this research. Rather than having separate interview data and discussion chapters, the two are woven together throughout to provide a more coherent and interpretive narrative structure. Chapter 4 analyses new, environmentally-driven developments in the management of estate parkland and farmland, shown in Chapters 4.1 and 4.2, respectively, along with the revised meanings that these changes carry on the

cultural significance and priorities of landscape. These developments are structured largely thematically rather than by site within each chapter to better demonstrate the breadth of these changes across property types. However, within this format, one primary case study for each, Calke Abbey for Chapter 4.1 and Holkham Hall for Chapter 4.2, are presented first as an archetype to which further data from other sites are then delivered in corroboration. Chapter 5 undertakes an analysis of habitat creation projects and the implications it has for the transformation of the rural estate landscape and examines the rewilding movement among historic estates. It is divided between that which the present work defines as ‘habitat creation’ (Chapter 5.1) and ‘rewilding’ (Chapter 5.2) to better reflect the contrast between their cultural and economic contexts. Chapter 6 reveals the broader philosophical, cultural, and economic factors which are driving landscape-focused changes across these rural estates in both their environmental contexts and as heritage tourism destinations. To accomplish this, Chapter 6.1 integrates the data provided in Chapters 4 and 5 and connects these developments to overarching themes of legacy, generational change, and the significance of the national government in supporting the ‘greening’ of these historic landscapes. Chapter 6.2 analyses these estates in their capacity as visitor destinations and explores the focal shift away from the house and towards the landscape, and how that has allowed these sites to adapt to changing social and cultural climates.

Chapter 7 draws on the interview results and discussion of the previous three chapters to reconstruct the English country estate in the twenty-first century and the means by which these historic landscapes have evolved to address contemporary concerns of environmental sustainability and human wellbeing. It then intersects this model with its wider historical and heritage contexts to demonstrate how a landscape perspective facilitates a revision of academic and popular perspectives on these historic sites and reinterprets them in light of their adaptation to the needs of a rapidly changing world. Together, this provides fresh and valuable insight into a highly transformative period in the history of these iconic and complex cultural landmarks.

Chapter 2. Historical and Literary Contexts

‘Arcadia’ in the Estate Landscape

To contextualise the overarching conceptual framework of this thesis and its scholarly intent, it is necessary to define and clarify the use of the term ‘Arcadia’ in its title. Over the long eighteenth century, concurrent to the growth of the English landscape garden, writers and poets used the classical Arcadian myth to celebrate the country estate and its surroundings as physical manifestations of an idyllic rural paradise (Ruff 2015; Richardson 2007). Authors routinely invoked Arcadian imagery to frame the estate as a site of righteous agricultural production and idealised refuge – a curated version of man and nature in perfect equilibrium, but expressive of the economic and political dominance of the landowning class (Williams 1973[2011], 30-35. Rather than appealing to nostalgia for this elite, eighteenth-century aesthetic, this thesis adopts the term to signal a contemporary reinterpretation of the concept. As historic estates navigate the environmental and social crises laid out in the previous chapter, these landscapes are being transformed to once again function as restorative Arcadias but reimagined in response to contemporary challenges.

To understand how this contemporary ecological and social ideal is being negotiated within these landscapes, it is necessary to chart the development of the formal institutions which have governed them and their associated country houses. It is similarly important to review the growth of scholarship and practice which has both informed and reacted to those overarching systems of management and preservation. Therefore, before proceeding to the case studies and original research of this work, the following sections will situate this thesis within its broader intellectual, historical, and socio-political contexts which serve as the reference point for analysing current developments in estate landscapes and changing perspectives on the country house as a heritage destination. To do so, a history of heritage and its growth as an academic discipline and preservation practice over the twentieth century will first be undertaken before reviewing the more recent history of the country house as a popular heritage object and focus of academic study. This chapter divides this heritage chronology into two key periods. The first begins with a review of late Victorian and early twentieth-century preservation movements in the United Kingdom, with a particular focus on its relationship to the English country house and the rural landscapes in which they are embedded, before briefly touching on early, post-war international developments. The second expands in scope to examine the global institutionalising of heritage, along with the influence of the postmodern in the latter twentieth century which led to a transition in heritage valuation towards an interdisciplinary approach

seeking multi-vocality, subjectivity, and community engagement as part of a globally important economic and cultural resource. A corresponding evolution in museum theory and practice is briefly reviewed in support, with an emphasis on how contemporary museologies have integrated matters of heritage and landscape conservation. This broader review of the development of heritage and museum practice and policy provides context for the more targeted analysis of how the country house became firmly established as a heritage object, the aesthetic and cultural appeals made in their defence, and evolutions in academic enquiry which run parallel to wider interdisciplinary and critical trends.

Focus then shifts back to the country house and its growth as an icon of popular culture and dominant heritage tourism destination during the later twentieth century in the UK. Additionally, it explores the concurrent rise in academic enquiries on the subject and the more recent influence of critical thought on country house research and their presentation and interpretation to the public through heritage tourism. Finally, a survey of current critiques and public debates surrounding changing emphases within country house interpretation and estate landscape management at large will be critical to situating this research within contemporary popular discourse. The National Trust in particular has been subject to accusations of reduced curatorial integrity in exchange for appealing to a wider audience and as such the current polemic against changing directives within the Trust will be used to assess this divide within contemporary heritage politics. Moreover, their introduction of eco-friendly farming strategies and habitat creation schemes into their land management systems has similarly drawn the ire of certain groups, inviting corresponding enquiry into popular debates over landscape significance. Addressing this ideological discord within a larger chronology of heritage theory and country house studies serves as the intellectual springboard for this work's assessment of these historic estates and gives weight to the analysis of the cultural crossroads at which they find themselves.

Authorised Heritage Discourse

Before moving forward, a brief enquiry into the term 'authorised heritage discourse', or AHD, introduced by Laura Jane Smith (2006) is useful as it plays a significant role in this thesis and has been embedded in the current social values and cultural meanings of the country house as a heritage asset (Smith 2021; 2016, 37; Adams 2013; Watson 2013; West 2010, 289).

Furthermore, it has become a critical component of current understandings on the social and political implications of systems of evaluation in modern heritage policy, tourism, and practice more broadly (Thouki & Skrede 2024; Fredheim & Khalaf 2016; Watson & Waterton 2011;

Waterton 2010; Waterton *et al.* 2006). Specifically, it is this notion that the authorised heritage discourse and the values it represents are the primary framework through which people engage with the country house through heritage tourism that the present work seeks to deconstruct from an estate-level landscape perspective.

In *Uses of Heritage* (2006), Smith first acknowledges that rather than any singular ‘thing’, heritage is representative of various processes or systems of ‘social meanings, forms of knowledge and expertise, power relations and ideologies [that] are embedded and reproduced via language’, i.e., discourse. She continues,

‘The discourses through which we frame certain concepts, issues or debates have an affect in so far as they constitute, construct, mediate and regulate understanding and debate. Discourse not only organizes the way concepts like heritage are understood, but the way we act, the social and technical practices we act out, and the way knowledge is constructed and reproduced’ (Smith 2006, 4).

Within this conceptual framework there can be multiple discourses operating simultaneously, either synergistically or dissonantly, elite or popular. Thus, the authorised heritage discourse is merely one of potentially many, but one that ‘privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building’ and is ‘institutionalized in state cultural agencies and amenity societies’ (Smith 2006, 11). Therefore, while there can be multiple ‘readings’ of a particular site or place, overarching heritage frameworks from the global to the national have created an ‘official’ discourse used to define heritage or to understand its significance that is self-reinforcing and prioritises expert knowledge and universal value (Smith 2016, 35-36). Smith (2012) argues this expert-led process of heritage-making advocates a ‘conserve as found’ conservation ethic which regulates and governs the ‘political and cultural meaning of the past’ and reinforces dominant, Western ideologies. This privileging of state-sanctioned, professional expertise continues to disregard the vernacular, lived experiences of non-expert, subaltern, and public stakeholders – even in circumstances where it has utilised tropes of ‘diversity’ and ‘integration’ (Waterton 2010, 8-9, 13). DeSilvey and Harrison (2019, 2) note this dominant, institutionalised and expert view asserts that heritage assets are a ‘non-renewable resource’ which must be conserved ‘on behalf of future generations’ but relies on presumed truths about its value to future communities and thus fails to critically address the subjective, dynamic, and fluid nature of heritage significance (De Marco & Parowicz 2026, 1). This static conservation

framework has been similarly identified in environmental governance and landscape management, which will be discussed later in this chapter (section 2.2).

The more recent integration of affect theory into heritage studies has sought to challenge these material-focused, authorising discourses by arguing that heritage is inherently embodied and emotionally constituted. However, rather than referring to simple emotional responses (e.g., joy or anger), affect is understood as the interactions between all material and immaterial elements of the heritage process, including visitors, staff, artefacts, spaces, content, memories, emotions and sensory experiences (Fielding 2022, 409). As a result, affect theory adopts a ‘more-than-representational’ view which focuses on the embodied and subjective experiences of place, beyond its discursive interpretation (Tolia-Kelly, Waterton and Watson 2018; Waterton 2014). Thus, heritage analyses grounded in affective understandings shift the focus to the embodied feelings of an individual or community away from the dominant and institutionalised meanings given by the expert and conveyed through the top-down discursive frameworks of the AHD (Amar & Armitage 2019; Högberg 2012, 161-162)

Noted above, it is possible, even likely, that multiple discourses or meanings might operate within a particular context simultaneously. However, while the affective potential of the country house may trigger a diversity of emotional responses, its value as interpreted through the AHD, as it traditionally has been, rests in its material-focused display of high culture and interpretive appeal to dominant and nationalising ideologies (Smith 2006, 115-121). This assessment is important to this work as it substantially reinforces earlier critiques of the country house as a heritage object as culturally conservative (Hewison 1987; Wright 1985 [2009]) and has since been upheld in more recent assessments (Smith 2021; 2016; Donington 2023a; Fowler 2025, 6-9; Fowler 2020; Bressley 2013). However, as the following sections will demonstrate, these associations and cultural meanings are largely the result of the process by which these houses became fixtures of the nation’s cultural heritage during the twentieth century.

2.1 A Chronology of Heritage

‘You can’t project that sort of rate of growth much further before the whole country becomes one big open air museum, and you just join it as you get off at Heathrow.’

- Sir Neil Cosson

Former Director of the London Science Museum and Chairman of English Heritage, Sir Neil Cosson’s famous 1986 remark on the growth of heritage in Britain has found its way into numerous postmodern critiques – namely, Robert Hewison’s (1987) *The Heritage Industry* which argues an almost profligate approach to heritage preservation and its concomitant

commercialisation in Britain in the latter twentieth century. But this over-saturation, whether real or perceived, is a relatively recent phenomenon (Swenson 2013, 2; Graham, Ashworth & Tunbridge 2000, 13). The network of governmental bodies, NGO's, museums, charities and planning authorities and their associated array of blue plaques, listed buildings, conservation areas, artefact collections and heritage sites that form a modern framework of conservation, interpretation, and management of the extant past is the product of exponential growth during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in governmental oversight, grassroots organisation, social movements and more recently, academic enquiry. Indeed, 'heritage studies' as an academic discipline marked by critical and self-reflective study has only existed for some two generations (Harrison 2013, 96-102).

Outlined above, two major periods of interest have been distinguished that are representative of generally opposing perspectives within this timeline, a dichotomy that has been summarised as a debate between nationalism and multiculturalism (Waterton 2010, 2). The first encompasses the roughly one hundred years or so between the mid-nineteenth century and the period following the Second World War which saw the birth and maturation of social and political interest in heritage conservation, the ensuing surge in governmental legislation and the establishment of organisations dedicated to heritage concerns, culminating in its formal globalisation by UNESCO and ICOMOS in the decades immediately following the Second World War. Approaches within this period are largely characterised by an emphasis on the values expressed through the language of the authorised heritage discourse discussed in the preceding section, for example, monumentality, nationalism, implicit worth and a Western bias (Otero-Pailos, Gaiger & West 2010, 49-50, 83; Smith 2006, 11). The second of these chronological demarcations picks up with rise of postmodernism in the latter twentieth century to the present wherein academic approaches and heritage policy have sought to emphasise multi-vocality, intangibility, self-critique, divergent conceptualisations of heritage, and greater appreciation for cultural and racial diversity within a population with an eye towards using heritage to address current global challenges (Jones 2017, 23; Harrison 2013, 10, 95-113; Winter 2013; Smith 2006, 37).

A Growing Concern: In Heritage We Trust

The origins of heritage as an academic discipline, tourist experience, and system of policy making practices are to be found during the age of nascent nationalism during the nineteenth century (Swenson 2013; Harvey 2001, 3). The details of this relationship are outside the scope of this work, however, the growth of heritage as it is understood today, the rise of the nation-state, and the construction of nationally defined cultural identities in the nineteenth century has

been well documented (Harrison 2013, 43; Swenson 2013; Samuel 1994; Anderson 1983). Moreover, it has been acknowledged that in order to *construct* the hegemonic nation-state, it is necessary that the body politic share and engage with a linear understanding of their own historical narratives, often stemming from a collectively remembered origin myth. This process worked to secure political legitimacy by consolidating national identification and establishing clear distinctions between accepted groups and outsiders – to be British is also to *not* be French, German, et cetera (Graham, Ashworth & Tunbridge 2000, 183; Harvey 2008, 28; Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996, 46; Hobsawm 1983). But the growing interest in the extant past during the nineteenth century was not simply an orchestrated attempt by the ruling elites to ensure public conformity and project state power internally and abroad. For example, as the following will show, in the United Kingdom some early preservation movements developed from democratic societies which sought to preserve elements of the built and natural environment for Britain's Victorian working classes (Lowe 1989).

While conservation movements during the nineteenth century were primarily private enterprises, receiving little governmental support, the Ancient Monuments Protection Act passed in 1882 was crucial in setting the foundation for further legislation vital to the National Trust and country house preservation. Though the 1882 Act included some medieval sites, it was primarily concerned with prehistoric structures, establishing a system of state sanctioned monuments protection that persists to this day (West & Ansell 2010, 34; Cowell 2008, 91; Thomas 2008, 139). That said, unlike several countries in continental Europe, the earliest conservation efforts were largely carried out by private individuals and amenity societies (Gentry & Smith 2019, 1150). Founded in 1895 by Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley, 'The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty' was formed in response to encroaching industrialisation in the English countryside. Octavia Hill, a champion for public access and the working classes, shared much in common with other Victorian Romantics and members of the Arts and Crafts movement such as John Ruskin, William Morris and the other founders of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). These individuals shared similar sentiments regarding the importance of public access to the nation's historical buildings and wild landscapes as well as a distaste for the seemingly inescapable destruction of England's 'green and pleasant land' by the industrial-capitalist machine (Shrubsole 2019, 237-238; Swenson 2013, 83-135). While the preservationist and naturalist movement of the Victorian period was rooted in radical, anti-capitalist sentiments, its

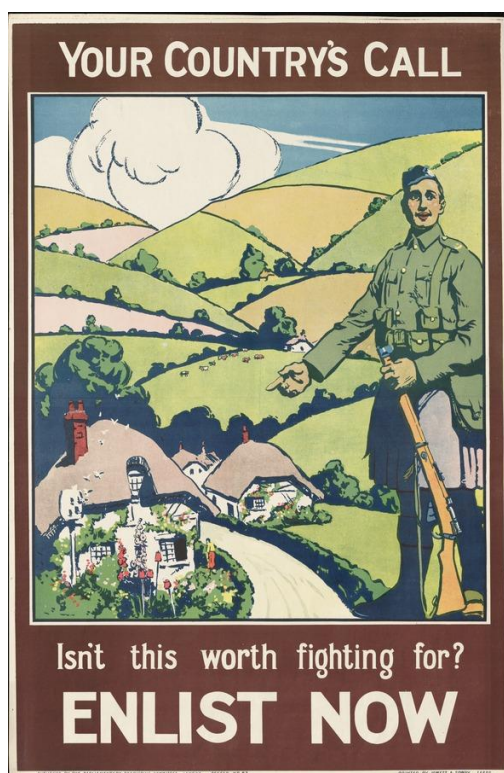


Figure 1. Nostalgic appeals to a romanticised rural English idyll were called upon to encourage the defence of Great Britain during the First World War (Ermacora 2015; Image: University of Leeds 2026)

originators were still very much associated with an educated and privileged minority,¹(Graham *et al.* 2000, 14). The nineteenth century saw a number of other groups dedicated to the conservation of built and natural environments, including The Commons Preservation Society in 1865, the National Footpaths Preservation Society in 1884 and the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising (SCAPA), founded in 1893, which like the National Trust was dedicated to the preservation of ‘the picturesque simplicity’ of the nation’s rural spaces and country towns from the ills of the free market (Cowell 2008, 91-92). The Romantic idea of the rural idyll in contrast to the noxious encroachment of modern industrialism prevalent around the turn of the twentieth century (Lowe 1989, 113-115) has been central to traditional ideas of English national identity and is a focus of contemporary critiques of the nation’s heritage

industry, embodying values inherent to the AHD (Watson 2013; Smith 2006, 117-118; Parkinson & Pendlebury 2020, 398-399; Watson 2013). This bucolic idealism of Deep England which envisions a pleasant tableau of ‘a morning mist on the Tweed...the wild anemones in the woods in April, the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as the twilight comes on...the smell of wood smoke coming up in an autumn evening’ has been strongly associated with modern conservative politics in Britain for which the country house is one of this vision’s constituent parts (Wright 2009, 77-83; Davison 2008, 37; Cornforth 1974, 2).

Compared to heritage genealogies on the continent where state intervention had been a major element of the nineteenth-century preservation movement, in England, these efforts were largely carried out by public and populist cooperatives (Gentry & Smith 2019, 1150; Swenson 2013, 15; Saint 1996, 115). However, three major pieces of twentieth-century legislation increased the level of state influence over heritage preservation beyond what the 1882 Act was capable of, namely the 1937 National Trust Act, the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and the 1953 Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act. Of these, the most significant to this

¹ The National Trust’s first president was the Duke of Westminster (Shrubsole 2019, 240).

work is the 1937 National Trust Act which established the Country Houses Scheme, allowing for the state authorised transfer of estates to the National Trust. This scheme permitted the families to continue to reside on the property but required public tourism access in lieu of death duties and marked a major shift from the Trust's original mission of nature conservation (National Trust 2022b; Gentry & Smith 2019, 1150; Gaze 1988, 121-133).

The Country Houses Scheme was largely inspired by Phillip Kerr, 11th Marquess of Lothian's 1934 appeal to the National Trust that they should do everything in their power to rescue the large number of ailing estates and their families (Littlejohn 1997, 97). The language he used to illustrate the value and significance of these homes is reflective of twentieth-century heritage perspectives on the country house and would be mirrored in future petitions made in their defence. Lord Lothian lamented that 'the country houses of Britain, with their gardens, their parks, their pictures, their furniture and their peculiar architectural charm' were a 'treasure of quiet beauty which is not only specially characteristic but quite unrivalled in any other land' which have 'played so profound a part in moulding the national character and life' but were 'now threatened with partial destruction' (Waterson 1994, 104). The reasons for this precarious position of so many elite families during the twentieth century are numerous, but can be broadly summarised as a result of declining aristocratic legislative and cultural power, increased inheritance and wealth taxation, poor agricultural outputs, economic depression and wartime requisitions (Musson 2018, 83; Littlejohn 1997, 45-47; Mandler 1996, 99). Some owners adapted, selling off lands or assets to offset financial losses, but when unable or unwilling to do so, estates were torn down, resulting in the demolition of over four hundred houses between 1920 and 1955 (Harris 1974, 16). The Country Houses Scheme then functioned as a safety net, wherein families might preserve their ancestral homes, but with the National Trust assuming ownership of the estate and opening the house and grounds to paying visitors.

These Acts of Parliament, which were ultimately concerned with the preservation of historic buildings, rural landscapes, and archaeological sites were implemented in response not only to wartime destruction or economic depression but to municipal expansion that continued to increase through the 1950s and 60s along with waves of urban redevelopment projects (Champion 1996, 50-53). These acts helped to ensure a greater amount of protection for some of the nation's historic sites and buildings, but these post-war governments were far from an established system of preservation policies. Regardless, popular tourism was on an upswing largely facilitated by greater household wealth and a growing number of automobiles. In contrast to country house visits among the elite which had been a hobby among high society since at least the Georgians, the 1950s and 60s witnessed an expansion in country house visiting with houses such as Longleat (Figure 2) and Beaulieu acquiring mass appeal (Cowell 2008, 117).



Figure 2. The 6th Marquess of Bath opened an African safari park at his Longleat estate in Wiltshire in 1966 to attract visitors to his ailing estate (BBC News 2016)

Between the growth in tourism, overall greater economic health, and maintenance funds from the exchequer for country houses of 'outstanding architectural or historic interest', the nation's estates would seem to have found their footing again, but demolitions would not decline below pre-war levels until the late 1960s (Clemenson 19[2021], 139). Increasing levels of piecemeal post-war intervention by the state would eventually come to a unified conclusion in 1983 with the National Heritage Act which established the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, also known as 'English Heritage' (Harrison 2013, 54). In general, the evolution of heritage policy in the UK can be broadly understood as a shift from populist preservation movements spearheaded by Victorian aesthetes to a governmental heritage

planning framework that developed through incremental state intervention in response to destruction, demolition, and urban expansion. However, the post-war decades witnessed heritage planning and practice develop on a global scale which underwent a series of ideological evolutions during the later twentieth century which are discussed briefly below.

Global Expansion

The story of later mid-century heritage preservation is one of state and global institutionalisation which served to establish international frameworks for heritage preservation, the legacies of which continue to the present. Their emphasis on positivist and technically-orientated heritage methodologies continue to serve as key reference points for charters and legislation in heritage preservation. Furthermore, these frameworks and the overarching institutions of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) that have implemented them are defined as critical ‘authorising institutions of heritage’ and play an essential role in the maintenance of the authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006, 87-96). In May 1964, a conference in Venice was held that hosted over six hundred participants from sixty-one countries with representatives from international organisations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe. The *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments of Sites*, or ‘Venice Charter’ signed at this conference, established ICOMOS and revised previous prerogatives in conservation, emphasising the maintenance of historical integrity in response to what had been an inclination towards over-restoration since the Second World War (Jokilehto 2018, 406-407). While social value was perhaps implied through its declaration of a ‘responsibility to safeguard [sites] for future generations’ (ICOMOS 1964), the intangible and social dimensions of heritage sites which are of greater contemporary concern were absent from the technical criteria outlined which prioritises a site’s aesthetic and historic value.

Shortly after the establishment of the Venice Charter, the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, more commonly known as the World Heritage Convention, was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in Paris in 1972. Expanding on the technical criteria set with the Venice Charter, the World Heritage Convention identified both cultural and natural ‘sites’ and ‘monuments’ that through historical, artistic, and scientific evaluations were deemed to be of ‘outstanding universal value’ (UNESCO 1972, article 1). While UNESCO has made revisions to better reflect changing priorities in heritage conservation and cultural diversity, the 1972 World Heritage Convention has received criticism for establishing a framework of heritage discourse that is biased towards Western Enlightenment ideals that

privilege scientific, architectural, and historical expertise at the expense of minority groups or Indigenous communities who may ascribe social value to sites, landscapes or objects through alternative means (Jones & Leech 2017, 8; Harrison 2013, 61-63; Smith 2006, 95-100). Waterton *et al.* (2006, 341) suggest that the Venice Charter 'may be understood as the international repository of authorised heritage discourse'. Indeed, following their assessment, and Smith's (2006) that traditional heritage valuations of the country house are reflective of the AHD in England, it is unsurprising that Blenheim Palace, one the nation's grandest country houses, was designated as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1987. The following section examines how the onset of postmodern thought fractured this institutionalised and material-centric view of heritage, sparking foundational debates that dismantled the assumption of objective heritage value and paved the way for contemporary critical frameworks.

2.2 Postmodern Heritage and Museology

The mid- to late twentieth century saw the advancement of a broad and interdisciplinary set of approaches to our understanding of the human condition, the negotiation of personal and communal identities, and the perception of our environments termed the 'postmodern'. A response to the social and intellectual structures of the post-Enlightenment age, postmodernism represents a mode of thinking characterised by a rejection of empirical truths, received wisdom, traditional conventions, and 'master narratives' (Brown 2013, 6-9; Watson 2006). While postmodernist thought has been applied to a number of disciplines, its relevance to contemporary heritage rests largely in its rejection of the intrinsic value of a site or artefact, assumed truths, and hegemonic historical narratives and values. In contrast, it favours pluralism, indeterminacy (Davis 2011, xv) and the 'disintegration of...influential systems or ideologies by means of which many people valued good and bad, high and low, true and false, in ethics and epistemology as well as in art and culture.' (Hannabuss 1999, 296). This pluralism, or multi-vocality has been instrumental in the construction of alternative and subaltern conceptions of heritage that have entered academic and public contexts and are representative of contemporary heritage approaches (McCall & Gray 2014; Smith 2006, 37; Graham *et al.* 2000, 75).

Heritage Debates

Contemporary heritage discourse rests largely on developments during the 1970s and 80s, both in academic contexts through the influence of postmodernism, the concept of *heritage studies* as a defined field of enquiry, and a dramatic increase in public interest in heritage tourism (Kolesnik & Rusanov 2020, 2-3; Waterton 2010, 72; Carman & Sørensen 2009, 17; Merriman

1991, 8-9; Hewison 1987; Wright 1985 [2009]). This period is equally important for the country house establishment, the specifics of which will be addressed below. Pertaining to heritage studies more broadly, this period saw the publication of several seminal texts that have remained relevant to the present day, including David Lowenthal's (1985) *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Patrick Wright's (2009[1985]) *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, and Robert Hewison's (1987) *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*. These works are emblematic of early analyses on the rampant growth in heritage as a commercial industry and an academic discipline and are critical components of what has been referred to as the late twentieth-century heritage debates which form the roots of modern critical heritage studies (Harrison 2013, 95-101). Lowenthal (1985) challenges the intrinsic nature of heritage, asserting that it is the means by which we use the historical past to serve the needs of the present. He claims that the urge to preserve is a response 'triggered by the pace of evanescence' (Lowenthal 2015, 28) and acknowledges the powerful role that nostalgia plays in modern society. Though their texts are often referenced in association, Wright and Hewison differ from Lowenthal by way of a specific interest in the socio-political landscape of 1980s Britain, but they are similarly concerned with the ubiquity of nostalgia and the means by which it is employed for particular ends. *On Living in an Old Country* and *The Heritage Industry* are noteworthy for their more critical assertion that Britain's historical past had been sanitised for political and commercial purposes in a declining post-imperial Britain, wherein conservative nostalgia served as a means of denying problems of the present (Harrison 2010, 16-18). In *The Representation of the Past*, Walsh (1992) levelled similar criticisms, suggesting the disconnection between person and place in modernity has been capitalised on by a commercial industry that trades in often nostalgic or patriotic heritage experiences.

Wright and Hewison's entropic view of Britain's heritage obsession has not been without its critics. Samuel (1994, 242-244, 264, 307) rejected the assertion that the heritage industry is something akin to an 'aristocratic plot' to avoid a 'wealth tax and an incoming and unsympathetic labour government', but that popular heritage is largely reflective of a democratic process by which groups and individuals negotiate collective memories and a historically contextualised present. Far from being inherently Conservative, Samuel cites the growing interest in working class histories, grassroots research societies, and personal genealogies as illustrating the democratisation of heritage interests in the late twentieth century (Samuel 1994, 160). Other commentators have found fault in what is seen as an unflinching universality in Wright and Hewison's assessment. Hunter (1996, 14) argues that their critiques falsely assume that all those who engage with heritage share a common set of typically

conservative values – that heritage practitioners and devotees are homogenous in their socio-political worldviews. Urry's (1990) concept of the 'tourist gaze' asserts that our individuality necessarily filters how we engage with a particular artefact or site and that heritage is defined in part by the consumer, disabling the uniformity of its experience. While she finds truth in the pasteurisation of history for the sake of tourism and the stultifying potential of a historically obsessed society, Smith (2006, 40-41), as with others, denies heritage's intrinsic homogeneity and the allegation that heritage conservation is inherently reflective of right-wing nostalgia. In *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, David Lowenthal (1998) assumes a similar stance against the inherent political bias of heritage, maintaining that, 'heritage is too complex, various, and widespread to classify by political faith. Left and right, elite and mass spokesmen alike nail heritage to their mastheads – or distance themselves from its follies' (Lowenthal 1998, 94). It is precisely this recognition of complexity which forms the basis of contemporary heritage discourses. While the discipline has expanded greatly since the 1980s and 90s, this debate laid the foundation for current academic approaches, and to some degree, policy-making contexts regarding heritage value through its critical methodology that challenges the assumed value in heritage preservation. In sum, heritage in the later twentieth century is marked by a shift from a paradigm that embraces presupposition to one that encourages dialogical interrogation, i.e., *why* do we preserve? The following section unpacks this shift and discusses the implications of this integration of critical thought into heritage, landscape, and museological theory which can be broadly understood as a contestation of the institutionalised and expert-led systems that became entrenched during the latter twentieth century.

Heritage and Museology in the Postmodern

Contemporary Heritage Discourses

Later twentieth- and twenty-first-century heritage discourses are predicated on what can be viewed as two fundamental and interrelated concepts. Firstly, that there are 'official' or 'authorised' discourses rooted in positivist knowledge practices which are embedded in regional, national, and global public policy that uphold systems which privilege expert judgement, national significance, intrinsic artistic or artefactual value, and an emphasis on the material fabric (Smith 2016, 35-36; Winter 2013, 537-538). This intellectual framework was traditionally invoked in support of country house preservation, that they were indisputably important because they represented the 'quintessence of Englishness' (Mandler 1997, 1). Secondly, that heritage is a human process, rather than merely collections of objects, buildings, or pieces of legislation. Therefore, in contrast to those official discourses, there are a myriad of divergent conceptualisations of heritage that may support or contest them (Smith 2006, 37). It is

within this ideological dichotomy that critical approaches to heritage have situated themselves in order to 'move beyond the traditional focus of heritage studies on technical issues of management and practice, to one emphasising heritage as a political, cultural and social phenomenon' (Gentry & Smith 2019, 1149). Critical to this expansion of heritage interpretations and the contestation of official or state-sanctioned heritage methodologies has been the negotiation of heritage valuation and planning between Indigenous and settler groups in post-colonial contexts (Greer 2011, 53-55; West & McKellar 2010, 198; Chilton 2009, 147). As such, in much the same way that the origins of the heritage industry have been traced to social and political movements of the nineteenth century, the Burra Charter of 1979 and its subsequent revisions have been referred to as the genesis of contemporary critical heritage studies through its emphasis on a critical, value-based framework for heritage management and interpretation (Emerick 2014, 3-4; West & Ansell 2010, 38-39).

First adopted in 1979 by the Australian ICOMOS, the Burra Charter, or the *Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance*, was based on the 1964 Venice Charter that came before it, adopting its principles for a specifically Australian context. The initial charter, along with its 1981 and 1988 revisions, diverged little from its predecessor with site importance being assessed primarily through its material fabric and 'authorised' forms of intrinsic heritage value, for example, age, rarity, beauty and national importance (Waterton *et al.* 2006, 341). However, the document underwent extensive revision in response to increasing pressure from Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities seeking more active participation in heritage management processes (Smith 2006, 102). While Clark (2009) points out that historically, all conservation work has been value-based; to preserve or restore is to make assessments about what is valuable, the importance of the further revised 1999 Burra Charter is in its explicit attempt to incorporate issues of plurality and multi-vocality through its assessment of a site's 'cultural significance', which may be 'aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual' (ICOMOS Australia 1999, article 1.2). Furthermore, it acknowledges the divergent nature of heritage through its assertion that 'places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups' (ICOMOS Australia 1999, article 1.2). In essence, for *whom* does a particular site, artefact or place have value and why? While Waterton *et al.* (2006) challenged the degree to which the Burra Charter had dismantled the dominant position of the AHD in heritage management policies, its influence has been understood through a greater emphasis on social inclusion, intangibility, social value, and multi-vocality in international heritage contexts (Jones 2017, 23). In 2003, UNESCO passed the *International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* which drew upon the same intellectual context as the Burra Charter. It stated

their commitment to the safeguarding of cultural practices characteristic of folkways and Indigenous groups such as oral traditions, rituals, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craft in order to promote cultural diversity and recognise what is culturally significant to communities from international to local contexts (UNESCO 2003, article 1, 2).

The Council of Europe's (2005) *The Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, or Faro Convention, builds on directives outlined in the Burra Charter and UNESCO's Convention for Intangible Heritage by admonishing heritage professionals to 'think and act locally, and bury once and for all any authoritarian, nationalist, monumental and normative views of heritage' (Wolferstan 2014, 43). Critical to this treaty was the acknowledgement at one of the highest levels of global policy that engagement with the construction, management, and interpretation of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is an inherent human right that is necessary to developing and maintaining a sustainable quality of life for all communities regardless of 'expert' status. Furthermore, it states that synergy between all 'public, institutional and private actors' is not only desirable, but necessary to facilitate positive and sustainable human development (Council of Europe 2005, article 1). The Faro Convention has been regarded as an important shift away from traditional and expert-led conventions of cultural heritage management within a discursive dichotomy characterised by contestation and collaboration between lay communities and heritage experts. In short, while it could hardly be called 'anti-expertise', its aim was the democratisation of heritage as a cornerstone of sustainable human development which characterises contemporary perspectives within the field of twenty-first-century critical heritage studies (Fairclough *et al.* 2014; Lashua & Baker 2014, 134; Wolferstan 2014, 44, 51; Bonnici 2009; Palmer 2009).

While the latter twentieth century saw the formation of heritage studies as a recognisable discipline, since the new millennium the growth of what has been termed *critical heritage studies* has been substantial. Fundamentally interdisciplinary, critical heritage studies refers to the body of contemporary scholarship that has moved past a primarily technical and material concern within heritage management and practice to one that regards cultural heritage as a social and political phenomenon (Gentry & Smith 2019, 1149; Harrison 2013, 117). In contrast to the 'typical' twentieth-century heritage canon of past-focused, nation-orientated and object-centred preservation, contemporary interests seek to understand and apply heritage interests to address global challenges including climate change, post-colonialism, peace-making and class equality (Carman & Sørensen 2009, 23). Beverly Butler remarks on this shift as moving from a Lowenthalian vision of 'the past as a foreign country' to one of 'heritage as a powerful

resource for “creating a future” that may ‘address claims about identity, ancestry and cultural transmission’ and ‘engage with key moral-ethical issues to our times’ (Butler 2006, 463). Indeed, Harrison (2020, 5-6) suggests that a ‘reframed notion of heritage as a processual and discursive, as well as material, legacy might reorient heritage studies more explicitly as a study of future-making’. At the heart of this reappraisal has been the idea that heritage is not a ‘thing’ but rather a series of active discursive processes for which Smith’s (2006) *Uses of Heritage* and her concept of the authorised heritage discourse has been fundamental (Robertson 2012, 6). The contestation of elite and hegemonic conceptualisations of heritage by subaltern groups has been a cornerstone of contemporary critical heritage research. Similarly, a rejection of intrinsic value present within the AHD and a stronger emphasis on ‘cultural significance’ and the means by which communities ascribe said significance in terms of identity, memory, sense of place, and sensory and spiritual experiences has become central to current approaches in heritage management and interpretation and, to some degree, global and national policies and guidelines (Jones & Leech 2015, 15). As such, heritage research in recent years has come to prioritise the affective nature of our tangible and intangible past in contrast to focusing on heritage as a product of hegemonic and nationalistic materialism. A comprehensive assessment of contributions that incorporate such perspectives and methodologies would require more space than the present work allows, but a brief overview of some of the salient points will be undertaken to situate this research within its wider intellectual context and provide practical evidence for current critical approaches.

As stated previously, Indigenous and minority groups have played a major role in challenging Western heritage modalities that prioritise specialist knowledge, high culture, and ‘official’ or state-sponsored valuations. Efforts to address inequalities within archaeology and heritage management systems in post-colonial contexts have relied on qualitative, community-driven and participatory research methodologies adapted from the social sciences which seek to understand the deeper meanings that are often indirectly associated with a particular place or object through an investigation of its social value for relevant stakeholders. In doing so, heritage discourses and management policies may, ideally, better reflect the cultural diversity of a particular place and redress post-colonial power imbalances. Former territories of the British Empire are a common area for assessments of said relationships to be carried out in response to Indigenous-settler relations and legacies of conflict and colonial rule. For example, Australia (Sneddon 2021; Greer 2011; Harrison 2011; Prangnell, Ross & Coghill 2011), New Zealand (Baird 2013), India (Sharma 2013) Kenya (Harrison & Hughes 2010, 240-266) and South Africa (Shepherd 2021; Meskell 2012; Nieves 2009, 198-214). Similar approaches have been mirrored

in North America within, museological, ethnographical, sociological and heritage contexts to prioritise and support marginalised groups such as American Indians (Herman 2016, 314-330; Minner 2016, 385-395), First Nations (Pope & Mills 2007, 169-186; Clavir 2002), and Black communities dealing with the lasting effects of slavery, segregation, and legacies of white ethno-supremacism (Lippard 2017, 56-78; Buzinde & Osagie 2011, 41-64; Jackson 2006).

These sorts of community-driven methodologies that work to assess the unique value of a site or object through meaning, sense of place, memory, and identity have now been employed elsewhere within a variety of research contexts that have sought to construct 'heritage from below' which Robertson (2012, 11) defines as 'both an opportunity for the expression of *other* heritages and identities, and a possibility for the assertion of a structure of feeling that runs counter to the hegemonic.' Such broad scope has allowed for the exploration of divergent or 'unofficial' heritages within more local and contemporary contexts that prioritise personal and more intimate meanings than state-led heritage mechanisms typically afford. Skinner (2005) participated in a community-driven process of local heritage assessment and preservation within her own Gloucestershire village through a collection of oral histories and local archive work to contribute to a greater sense of local identity and understanding of place. Pendlebury *et al.* (2009, 179-200) explored the relationship between 'expert' views on the significance of the Byker housing estate in Newcastle upon Tyne and the personal meanings for residents after the site was given heritage listing in 2007, assessing how state-level significance was defined either congruently or dissonantly with that of those who actively lived there. Rachael Kiddey (2014, 165-179) examined the way in which socially marginalised people experience or attach themselves to place through her work with homeless individuals in Bristol and York wherein participants shared the meanings and memories associated with particular places. Several individuals reported feelings of happiness and improved self-esteem through working with Kiddey, helping to overcome adversities in their lives which supports the Faro Convention's assertion that heritage engagement is necessary for sustainable and positive human development. These sorts of 'micro-heritages' are consistent with work that addresses grand historical narratives such as colonialism or imperialism through their understanding that values ascribed to spaces and things can be intensely personal and subjective and that official forms of heritage valuation may not be adequately representative of the multitude of meanings present within a particular place or object. As such, heritages in these local narratives often reflect the same contestation of authorised heritage values as that of more globally-orientated, post-colonial work in Indigenous-settler contexts. By outlining how perspectives on landscape have evolved alongside these critical discourses, the subsequent section explores how physical

and mobile environments provide an active arena to contest dominant narratives, ultimately setting up the decentralised, community-led frameworks of the ecomuseum discussed at this chapter's conclusion.

Landscapes Studies: Critical Approaches

Building on the 'bottom-up' approach to heritage-making discussed above and with particular significance to this research through its landscape-level perspective, contemporary methodologies in evaluating landscape significance have increasingly dismantled the rigid frameworks of the authorised heritage discourse, shifting the focus toward living, contested, and socio-ecological processes. Indeed, Santos and de Los Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo (2020) proposed the concept of the 'Authorised Landscape Discourse' (ALD) in which conceptions of landscape have been institutionalised into 'canonical landscapes' by 'dominant elites' which 'exclude the dynamics of rural populations (Santos & De Los Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo 2020). Through a similar intellectual trajectory to the above, landscape studies over the past two decades have moved from a primarily visual (Cresswell 2003) and static interpretation of landscape as a 'neutral, external backdrop to human activities' (Ingold 1993, 152) towards one which views it as relational, embodied, and experiential (Michel, Hartmann and Schneider 2025, 1). Waterton (2018, 95) argues this shift has led to landscapes being 'imagined as fluid and animating processes in a constant state of becoming', mirroring the transition in conceptions of heritage from it being primarily regarded as a tangible site or object to a series of active and passive processes (Robertson 2012, 6). As with the broader critical turn, this move away from static perceptions of landscape has been strongly informed by Indigenous and feminist scholarship (Springgay & Truman 2021). Within this development, ideas of power, contestation, and community involvement have become central to modern landscape studies and scholars have argued for a more inclusive and participatory system of landscape heritage management (Jacobs *et al.* 2023, 1041-1042). In the UK in particular, the presence of power hierarchies and a sense of belonging within rural landscapes are deeply intertwined with issues around unequal access and cultural exclusion, exacerbated by the understood benefits to physical and mental wellbeing they provide (Hodsdon 2021, 271-272). In *The Lie of the Land* (Shrubsole 2024), Guy Shrubsole expands on his investigation into the extreme concentration of land ownership discussed in *Who Owns England?* (Shrubsole 2019). In it, he argues such hierarchies and inequalities in access and public input on land management are systemic problems that ultimately hinder environmental and sociological progress.

While an emphasis on public participation and community involvement in land management was incorporated into governmental policy systems through the Council of Europe's European

Landscape Convention in 2000 (Council of Europe 2000), in practice, community participation in the delivery of landscape change has been limited (Tenzer 2024, 270). To address this, new enquiries into the subjective, alternative, and experiential significance of landscapes have pursued methodologies which seek to balance the position of privileged collaborators, parties, and specialists through active participation amongst community stakeholders. Qualitative methodologies, such as ‘in-landscape’ walking interviews have been utilised to capture relational dialogues between participants and their material environments, problematising dominant frameworks through ‘bottom-up’ evaluations of landscape and place significance similar to those referenced above (Evans & Jones 2011). For example, Ratcliffe’s (2024) investigation into the representation of local communities in land management decisions in the North York Moors National Park revealed contestations in landscape values between residents and landowners, particularly around environmental issues in this upland context.

The intersection of the social and ecological components of landscape has become a key part of contemporary critical heritage studies and landscape scholarship has increasingly converged with the critical frameworks of ‘Heritage Futures’ (Harrison *et al.* 2020a). Mirroring Butler (2006, 463), Harrison and his colleagues argue that heritage practice should reorientate itself more explicitly as a ‘study of future-making or worlding practices’ (Harrison *et al.* 2020b, 5-6). In the contemporary context of the climate crisis and Anthropocene, this has led to a reframed understanding of the ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ as being inextricably linked, against traditional and institutionalised forms of conservation which have regarded them as separate concerns (Harrison 2015, 24). As a result, more flexible approaches to heritage conservation over past-focused static preservation provide an opportunity to create more sustainable futures in response to environmental crises (Harvey & Perry 2015). This is particularly true where environmentally-driven changes to create more sustainable human and non-human futures require radically altering extant cultural landscapes – though Drenthen (2018) argues large-scale landscape initiatives, such as rewilding, merely represent another form of cultural expression. This intersection of nature and culture which regards heritage as a tool for ‘creating a future’ (Buter 2006, 463), underpins the ecomuseum as a museological concept and model. The following section will review the growth of the ecomuseum ideal and how it has been developed as a means of addressing social and environmental needs within a blended heritage and museological framework which operates at a landscape-level perspective.

The New Museology and The Ecomuseum

The same postmodernist turn which led to revisions of UNESCO policy and the reconceptualisation of heritage values influenced a cultural and philosophical shift in museum

practice resulting in an interrelated move away from the classical, objectivist paradigm that relies on intrinsic object significance in collections-focused museological models. While challenges to this increasingly outdated format were developing over the decades before, 1971 was a tipping point for the reformation of the industry. That year, at the meeting of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Grenoble, representatives argued that museums were out of touch with the contemporary world. To address this, an 'integrated museum' built on participation with, and in service to its society would need to be the blueprint for the museum of the future (Hudson 1977, 11-15). This notion was further centred into museological practice during ICOM's tenth general conference in 1974, when it was firmly established that 'museums are no longer considered to be merely storehouses or agents for the preservation of a country's cultural and natural heritage' (Hudson 1977, 1). ICOM's revised definition of the museum given that year stated that museums must be 'in the service of society and its development' (Mairesse 2020).

The later twentieth century saw an expansion of this conceptual framework and mirrored the heritage industry's turn towards more community-orientated, socially conscious, and equitable forms of exhibition and interpretation (Garlandini 2022; Knell, Macleod and Watson 2007; Ross 2004, 85-85). These ideological renegotiations in museum contexts, referred to as the 'new museology', were summarised by Peter Vergo in his landmark introduction of the concept into the Anglosphere, *The New Museology* (1989, 3) as a 'state of widespread dissatisfaction with the old museology...[which] is too much about museum methods and too little about the purposes of museums'. This re-examined approach to global museological preservation and interpretation has continued to apply a critical lens to the profession, integrating approaches to feminism (Ashton 2017), gender and sexuality (Adair & Levin 2020), race and ethnicity (Potter *et al.* 2023; Olivares & Piatak 2021), class (Smed 2021), and decolonisation and indigenous identities (Lersch & Ocampo 2024; Onciul 2015). Moreover, it advocates for a willingness on behalf of museums to promote multi-vocality, enact change, reach new audiences and address longstanding issues of elitism, representation, and inaccessibility in museum practice (Davis 2008, 340). Published in 2022, ICOM's latest revision of their museum definition exemplifies this ideal and emphasises the need for museums to incorporate and address four critical components: accessibility, inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability (ICOM 2022).

This movement away from what can be interpreted as an 'authorised museological discourse' enrobed in its hegemonic and objectivist paradigm, encouraged the growth of new forms of museums, in particular, *social museums* and *community museums*. Though practical differences exist between them, they share an ethnographic approach centred on addressing

social and cultural issues such as the above with an overriding aim of public development (Desvallées & Mairesse 2010, 76). The former includes socially-conscious brick-and-mortar museums such as London's Queer Britain, Manchester's People's History Museum (formerly the National Museum of Labour History) or the National Museum of African American History & Culture in Washington, DC. While both forms seek to facilitate a dynamic space to foster social dialogue and address contemporary civic issues, the community museum, often synonymous with *ecomuseum*, situates itself more directly within the landscape and population which it aims to serve (Canavese, Gianotti and de Varine 2018, 44). More flexible and abstract in concept, the following section will unpack key themes in ecomuseology to establish a useable theoretical reference point of the model in this work.

Highly characteristic of the values of the 'new museology', the ecomuseum exemplifies the movement (Heron 1991). In fact, while one of its progenitors argues we should be hesitant to conflate the two (de Varine 1988, 64), many authors consider the ecomuseum and the new museology to be synonymous (Davis 2011, xv). Though the idea had been percolating since the early 1950s, in 1971, the term *ecomuseum* (in French, *ecomusée*) was coined by Hugues de Varine and his colleague Georges Henri Rivière, director and former director of ICOM, respectively. Since then, the term has been adapted, remodelled and reinterpreted, reflecting the flexibility in Rivière's own assertion that the ecomuseum's 'diversity is limitless' (Rivière 1985, 183). The prefix 'eco-', suggests an intrinsic association to ecology and the natural environment, which indeed is a key element of the ecomuseum and a pivotal part of Rivière's final reworking of the concept: 'it is an expression of man and nature [and] situates man in his natural environment' (Rivière 1985, 182). However, the use of the prefix reflects the political ambitions of the model during the period of later mid-century environmentalism – a convenient term meant to challenge the museological status quo (Davis 2011, 3).

While an important feature of the concept, the ecomuseum goes beyond simply connecting man and nature within a landscape. More akin to an ideological proclamation than a definition, Rivière claims that an ecomuseum is a 'mirror which the local population views itself to discover its own image...an expression of time...an interpretation of space...a conservation centre...a school [and] a laboratory' (Rivière 1985 182-183). Hugh de Varine (de Varine 1992, quoted in Davis 1999: 69) gave a correspondingly unstructured definition of the concept as 'an opportunity to run with new ideas, to be imaginative, to initiate new ways of work, to even be audacious'. However, other analyses have sought to create a more defined model of the ecomuseum, if still perhaps in a theoretical sense. In his article, 'museums and ecomuseums – questions and answers', René Rivard (1988) sought to give the model some parameters by

comparing the significance of the ecomuseum (territory + heritage + memory + population) to the traditional museum (building + collections + experts + techniques). He continues, calling back to Rivière (1985, 182) by declaring that ecomuseums work to bring humans and the natural environment together through community involvement in conserving and enhancing traditional habitats and ecosystems (as cited in Davis 2011, 82). Leading from the overriding emphases on human development outlined in earlier advancements in museology, the European 'Long Network' of ecomuseums met in Trento, Italy in 2004 and produced their own definition of the model as 'a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development...based on a community agreement' (Murtas & Davis 2009, 151). Other enquiries into the subject have sought to define it through a list of key characteristics of the ecomuseum ideal. Corsane (2006, 219-220) lists twenty-one principles including public participation, local identity, sense of place, and heritage safeguarding, framed by a holistic approach to interpreting culture and nature together.

One of the most prolific writers in the English-speaking world on the topic, Peter Davis has written extensively on ecomuseology and in 1999 published his landmark text, *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place*, republished again in 2011. A substantial contribution to the field, it covers its history, its multitude of interpretations, and a number of case studies from around the globe which demonstrate the flexibility and diversity of the model. Through his additions on the subject, he has helped advance both theoretical and practical understandings of the concept, crystallising its defining qualities. The most recent interpretation of the concept, provided by Davis (2007, 116), describes the ecomuseum as 'a community-based museum or heritage project that supports sustainable development'. Hence, reflecting the principles of the new museology which are intrinsic to and informed by the ecomuseum model, inherent to its design and practice is the democratisation of the museum and a reorientation towards local communities and human development (Davis 2008, 340). However, even still, this definition leaves room for an extensive array of characteristic diversity which scholars have sought to deconstruct.

Acknowledging the diversity of ecomuseums around the world and the range of flexible interpretations and definitions given, a subsequent exploratory analysis of the ecomuseum observatory database was undertaken by Borelli & Davis (2012, 34) which found that 98% of all ecomuseums are located in rural areas and 'emphasize the link with local history, local landscapes, natural resources, biotopes and agricultural practices'. In their research on the benefits of international youth exchange networks mediated through ecomuseums, Brown and Brown (2024) likewise placed them at the convergence of culture and the natural environment.

Chang *et al.* (2015) undertook a meta-analysis of ecomuseum literature with the similar aim of determining the model's defining characteristics and uncovered themes of sustainability as the most common denominator, whether in reference to the environment, cultures or human development more broadly. Ultimately, rather than a clearly defined set of parameters, ecomuseology should thus be considered a dynamic process or methodology through which heritage, nature, landscapes, community, and sustainability are linked with an overarching purpose of local societal improvement. Consequently, the over 350 ecomuseums globally can pursue different routes of delivering on this multi-faceted ideal. Only within such a flexible model might the Chinese Soga Miao ecomuseum in Guizhou province which preserves and supports the cultural heritage and lifestyle of the remote, indigenous Changjiao Miao people sit alongside Britain's Flodden 1513 ecomuseum with its battlefields and country houses (Flodden 2025; Corsane 2006).

A 'museum without walls' (Corinto 2020), the ecomuseum bridges the gap between contemporary heritage preservation and museum theory and practice. In as much as the re-evaluation of heritage values has aimed to move away from the 'authorised heritage discourse', museologies have likewise sought to distance themselves from the classical model of an object-focused artefact repository reliant on intrinsic value and specialist authority within an elitist and Western objectivist paradigm. Both fields have increasingly endeavoured to engage with their wider communities to address contemporary issues, to look forward rather than merely to the past. Moreover, this reconceptualisation has further entwined these two fields of preservation. As demonstrated by the ecomuseum, current approaches to conservation might find all the various pieces of each – buildings, artefacts, intangible culture, and the environment – under one umbrella. In many ways, the traditional country house museum epitomises classical forms of museology and heritage significance; a grand building valued for its relevance to national narratives and high culture which houses a collection of fine art and artefacts of colonial power. However, the academic disciplines concerned with them have undergone a corresponding shift since the social and cultural turns of the mid- and late twentieth century. To understand how these competing paradigms play out within the English heritage fabric, the remainder of this chapter narrows its lens to the specific socio-political history, historiographies, and evolving institutional management of the country house and its wider estate.

2.3 Heritage and the Country House

The Stately Home Reborn

During the twentieth century, intervention by the state, acquisitions by the National Trust, and a burgeoning country house tourism industry helped rescue some landed estates and their families from financial ruin. Despite this, and in light of Evelyn Waugh's 1959 remark on 'the present cult of the English country house', country house demolition was rampant during the post-war years – an estate's survival reliant much more on private wealth than any lucrative public heritage industry (Mandler 1997, 355). In the 1950s and 60s, the roughly one hundred homes open to tourists were far outnumbered by those not yet willing to take the plunge (Mandler 1996, 109). Beginning in the 1970s there was an explosive growth in studies, publications, conservation efforts, and tourism directed at the country house in Britain. Indeed, it is this period and the Victoria & Albert Museum's 1974 exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975* more specifically, that is often referred to as the birth of the modern 'cult' of the country house (Cornforth 1998, 39). The exhibition was not the only distress signal lit on behalf of the nation's country houses during the 1970s. John Cornforth's survey, *Country Houses in Britain – can they survive?*, was published in 1974 after he was commissioned by the British Tourist Authority. His research indicated a bleak financial position for Britain's estates despite protective legislations passed in the preceding decades. Roy Strong, co-curator for *The Destruction of the Country House* acknowledges that conversations with Cornforth during the compiling of his report was the inspiration for the exhibition (Strong, Binney & Harris 1974, 6).

As illustrated previously, by the 1970s country house visiting was not an unpopular hobby among the public, nor were they devoid of literature devoted to the subject. James Lees-Milne, who served as secretary of the National Trust's Country Houses Committee from 1936-1950, had published several architectural histories of the country house before the V&A's exhibition (Lees-Milne 1970; 1953; 1951). Nevertheless, *The Destruction of the Country House* was critical to establishing them in popular sentiment as representative of the best in British cultural achievements and an essential part of the nation's built heritage (Adams 2013; Littlejohn 1997, 39). In spite of the concurrent growth in postmodernist influence during the 1970s, the language used in reference to these homes in the exhibition strongly conformed to the very traditional notions of heritage values expressed by Lord Lothian in 1934. In his contribution to the exhibition's corresponding publication *The Destruction of the Country House* (1974), James Lees-Milne waxes poetically of their intrinsic artistic merit and national significance, remarking that not only are they 'monuments but cradles of the great' (Lees-Milne 1974, 13). *Destruction* was a trifecta of an exhibition – one part art exhibit, one part eulogy, and one part call to arms.

The centrepiece of the exhibition was the 'Hall of Lost Houses' (Figure 3), which consisted of a gallery display constructed to look as if it was being razed, featuring images of demolished houses plastered onto a reconstructed Palladian façade whose columns were tumbling down.



Figure 3. *The Hall of Lost Houses at The Destruction of the Country House* (The Country Seat 2024)

The lamentation over what had already been lost concluded with a warning that if nothing was done to stem the crisis demolitions would continue *en masse*. The emotional appeal effectively constructed a political debate about systems of taxation with some observers reading an almost philistine approach to state-led asset confiscation (Mandler 1997, 404). The success of *Destruction* can in some ways be attributed to the exhibition's co-curator, Marcus Binney's, publicity campaigns which included supplying local newspapers with photographs and information regarding local houses facing demolition, encouraging collaboration with local amenity societies, and facilitating a democratic sense of urgency. Rather than coming to the aid of the aristocracy, Britain was called upon to rescue its national heritage (Mandler 1997, 406). Hewison (1987, 71) argues that it is precisely this appeal to cultural significance in the face of financial ruin that secured Britain's country houses' position as emblematic of the nation's cultural heritage during the 1980s.

Facilitated by the Country Houses Scheme established with the 1937 National Trust Act and encouraged by now broader public interest in the country house, the 1970s and 80s saw the National Trust function again as a safety net for some houses and their estates, being offered one after another, ultimately acquiring twenty houses between 1977 and 1986 (Cornforth 1998,

272; Waterson 1994, 196). While tourism accelerated in general during these decades, country house visiting expanded significantly during the 1980s and by 1993 it was reported that a third of the entire adult population had visited a stately home in the preceding year (Mandler 1997, 411-412). Acknowledging small scale trends in country house visiting earlier in the century, the modern model and heritage significance of the country house as a dominant tourist destination finds most of its footing in these post-war decades. This same period witnessed a corresponding growth in academic enquiries on the country house, its gardens and designed landscapes. Furthermore, more recent contributions to this field have sought to critically deconstruct these houses and their landscapes, refining understandings of their historic and contemporary social, political, and economic roles.

Country House Literature

Rather than a comprehensive investigation into the considerable number of publications on the country house and its landscapes, the following is a chronological survey which relates the intellectual trajectory of these texts to both the country house industry and the influence of the previously reviewed social and cultural turns on the field of study. Reflecting the separation of house and landscape architecture which has traditionally characterised the bulk of publications on the country house, the literature discussed herein has been divided similarly. However, in both cases, there is a corresponding transition between the primacy of the art historical and later assessments which critically intersect these houses and landscapes with their cultural, socio-political, and economic contexts.

The Country House

Launched in 1897, the weekly magazine *Country Life* was essential to the development of the modern country house literary genre. Each issue of ‘the journal for all interested in country life and country pursuits’ (Country Life 1897), contained an illustrated review of a particular home (Figure 4), praising both the artistic and architectural qualities of the house and the pedigree of the owning family in a celebratory air of connoisseurship. Beyond the periodical, their multi-volume compendiums on country house architecture, from Henry Avray Tipping’s *English Homes* (1920-1937) to Christopher Hussey’s *English Country Houses* (1955-1958), helped create much of the corpus of work on the subject during the first half of the twentieth century. The latter in particular helped set the standard for further works, with detailed architectural surveys and floorplans and a focus on periodic styles and designers from an image-laden art historical perspective. Discussed above, it was during this time that country house preservation, facilitated by the Country Houses Scheme and the 1937 National Trust Act, gained pace and James Lees-Milne published a number of works which can be added to the pile of mid-century

architectural histories of British stately homes. In an objectivist style of the aesthete consistent with his contemporaries, his works, including *The Age of Adam* (Lees-Milne 1947), *The Tudor Renaissance* (Lees-Milne 1951) and *English Country Houses: Baroque, 1685-1715* (Lees-Milne 1970), are surveys organised around architectural style and designers. The last of these, *English Country Houses* (Lees-Milne 1970), also published by Country Life, notably adopts Hussey's format with detailed floorplans lending a spatial dimension to the gallery-esque, art historical appraisal of the interior architecture.

COUNTRY HOMES: WITLEY COURT.

THE very stately mansion of the Earl of Dudley stands in a part of Worcestershire that is full of attraction in its natural beauties. It is a region of ancient forests, where the giants of a former day have lost nothing of their vigour, and where modern hands have reinforced them by fine avenues and thriving plantations. Here, where the Severn and the Teme approach to their confluence, the two hills of Woodbury—which the natives thereabout call "Oubury"—and Abberley, at the northern end of the Malvern system, overlook, in a delightful situation between the rivers, yet at a distance on either hand, the great seat of Witley. They are hills visible through all the country-side, with far-spread prospects from their crests. Long ago there stood a mansion where Lord Dudley now has his seat, in which dwelt a family of the name of Cooksey, then of importance in the shire. These people could doubtless have settled for us a somewhat disputed point in the history of the place, concerning an episode which occurred when Owen Glendower, having harried the marches of Wales, advanced into the Midlands of England. The crowned Welshman was playing his last stake in alliance with the French, under Montmorency, who had landed at Milford Haven. The English bitterly resented this alliance, and perhaps it was in reference to the fighting round Witley—at least we may hazard the surmise—that they satirised the French in a manner which has been variously rendered:

of the Duke of Chandos, at Cannons. The glass is by Price, and the ceiling by Verrio. It may be remembered that Pope bitterly satirised—though he once disavowed it—the Duke's extravagant establishment, and particularly the chapel, where, as he says:

"On painted ceilings you devoutly stare,
Where sprawl the saints of Verrio or Laguerre."

The ceiling and windows may still be seen at Witley, where the whole church is very elaborately adorned in the Renaissance style. The extreme closeness of the structure to the mansion has been often remarked upon. One Mr. Sullivan, in the course of a tour last century, alluded to this matter to the old housekeeper at Witley, who pertinently replied that those who were offended at the sight of mortality might shut the windows. All has been changed since that time, and the churchyard does not now intrude upon the garden. The late Earl of Dudley bought Lord Foley's place, and all traces that had been left of the older structure have disappeared. A quarter of a million of money is said to have been expended in the rebuilding and adornment of the place. Among the stately homes of England it stands as one pre-eminent, though it is architecturally without particular distinction, and has nothing of the picturesque. But Witley is one of those modern houses which are imposing with a classic grace reminiscent of Italian climes. In this it is like

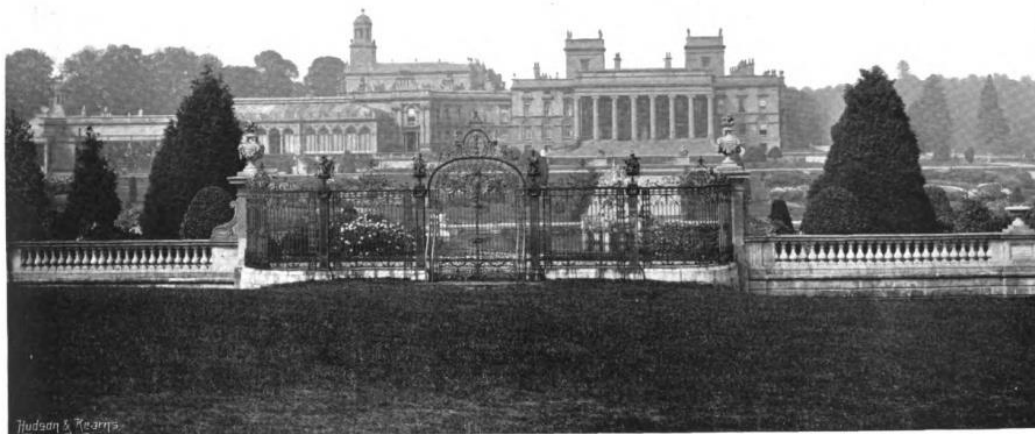


Photo. by H. J. Whitlock,

ACROSS THE GARDEN.

Birmingham.

"The King of France, with forty thousand men,
Marched up a hill!—and then—
Marched down again!"

However this may be, there is an ancient earthwork on the top of Woodbury, known as Owen Glendower's Camp, to which he marched with his allies, while Henry IV., who had with him Prince Hal, then a pretence soldier, imitating his tactics, ascended to the top of Abberley Hill. We are invited, then, to witness the spectacle of valiant champions descending from the heights for single combat in the plain at Witley. But the truth is that the Welsh and their allies fell short of supplies, and, being hunted out, were driven back to the marches, wasting the country behind them.

So much for the older history of Witley. Its modern story begins with the prosperity of Thomas Foley, member for the county of Worcester, who bought the heritage of the Cookseys in the seventeenth century. He had amassed a great sum of money out of his ironworks during the Rebellion, and his grandson was made a peer, as Baron Foley, in 1711. Up to this time the Elizabethan house had been very little changed, if at all, but Lord Foley added to it an immense white building, consisting of a centre and two projecting wings, of which one writer curiously says that "the back-front had an elegant airy colonnade." Lord Foley also rebuilt the church, which stands very close to the mansion, and is connected with it by a gallery. He appears to have spent a great sum of money upon it, and the windows were glazed and the ceiling adorned by works from the chapel

Chatsworth, Castle Howard, and many more such palatial abodes. Its various chambers are large and lofty. They are decorated with extreme richness, and with the directing hand of exquisite taste. They are furnished in a manner most choice, and upon their walls hang many admirable examples of various schools of art. No stinting hand has brought the place to the position it holds, and nothing is wanting to its completeness as a great country home.

The park of 600 acres, through which fine avenues lead to the house, contains many splendid oaks from the old forest, and the swelling hillsides are clothed with the rich growth of more recent times. The woods and coverts are well stocked with game. Extremely beautiful, too, are the gardens about the house. These cover ten acres, and rank with the finest examples of the gardener's art in this country. Like the building, they were wholly remodelled, and are in admirable harmony with it, though the arrangement has something of a reminiscence of an earlier time. The iron grille, with its splendid hammered gates, and the balustrade, with its urns, which have some resemblance to those at Hampton Court, remind us a little of the arrangement which exists at Hatfield and some other houses of an earlier time. The work of remodelling the gardens was carried out by Nesfield, who designed the fountains and various accessories. The great central fountain is very remarkable. From the midst of the basin, which has Tritons and Cupids at the angles, there rises, upon a rustic base, ornamented with shells and dolphins, a colossal equestrian Perseus rescuing Andromeda

Borne out of the cultural turn of the 1970s and reflective of the *Destruction*-inspired popularity of country houses, the later decades of the twentieth century witnessed a flurry of scholarly assessments of the country house which begin to diverge from the aesthetics-centred architectural surveys which had prevailed thus far. Though many of these texts move beyond purely the aesthetic, they are still largely reliant on dominant heritage perspectives, i.e., the assumed intrinsic value of the house and collections, their significance to a nationalistic understanding of heritage, and a focus on high culture, with little attention given to either the lower classes who underpinned these estates or to their associations with global narratives of slavery and colonialism. Characteristic of academic approaches to the country house during the latter twentieth century are Olive Cook's (1974) *The English Country House: An Art and Way of Life* and Mark Girouard's (1978) highly influential *Life in the English Country House*. Both works present chronologies of country house design with a focus on interiors from the medieval period to the turn of the twentieth century. Laden with detailed floorplans, they chart changing fashions in elite art and architecture and the social patterns and performances which played out within these settings. However, *Life in the English Country House* stands out for moving beyond the art-historical typologies of Cook, Lees-Milne or Hussey. In doing so, he prioritises the social functions of the home and reveals how changing architectural trends are reflexively related to evolving patterns of social behaviour and family life. Moreover, he was one of the first to incorporate interrelationships of class and gender and the means by which these social structures were renegotiated through redevelopments in country house designs.

These illustrated social and architectural histories of the country house became prolific and are typical of publications particularly during the 1980s, but through to the twenty-first century. Texts such as *The English Country House and its furnishings* (Wilson 1977), *The Victorian Country House* (Girouard 1979), *The English Country House: A Grand Tour* (Gervase & Pipkin 1984), *The Early Tudor Country House* (Howard 1987), *Scottish Country Houses 1600-1914* (Gow & Rowan 1995) and *The Scottish Chateau* (McKean 2001) fit into this academic paradigm, blending the art historical with the social functions and political contexts of the stately home to varying degrees of emphasis. For example, Mark Girouard's (1987) *A Country House Companion* departs from a chronological, architectural analysis and is instead organised thematically according to the various social functions of these historic estates. A substantial amount of the text is taken from contemporary accounts, personal communications, recipes, bills and poems to create an intensely personal experience as if the reader entered these houses as an 'invisible tourist' (Girouard 1987, 6).

Parks and Gardens

Complementary to the foregoing works which are largely biased towards the house and its contents are those concerned with the formal gardens and designed parkland landscapes which accompany them. Following a stylistic chronology similar to those concerned with the home, earlier works within this field of enquiry prioritise an art historical perspective on these historic landscapes, with later additions blending that with the wider socio-political and economic contexts of their creation and use. As a result of a Victorian and early twentieth-century disinterest in the naturalistic designed parklands of Capability Brown and his stylistic peers (English Heritage n.d.; Woudstra & Finch 2020, 199; Carder 1986, 22-25), early texts within this field concern themselves with the formal gardens and elaborate parterres of stately homes, with occasional passing mention given to their associated parklands. Typical of this medium, *Gardens, Old and New: The Country House & Its Garden Environment* (Leyland 1900) and *Formal Gardens in England and Scotland: Their Planning and Arrangement, Architectural and Ornamental Features* (Triggs 1902) present heavily descriptive surveys of country house gardens in Britain limited to their architectural design with brief celebrations of the historical significance and dignity of the place. The distaste for the designed parklands in the English style persisted and in *The Formal Garden in England* (Bloomfield 1936), architect and gardenist, Sir Reginald Bloomfield (1856-1942) lambasts the landscape garden as unsophisticated ‘as it requires no knowledge of design [and] appeals to the average person’ (Bloomfield 1936, 11).

From the 1940s however, a renewed interest in Brown’s work and the designed parklands of the English landscape style for which he became synonymous gave rise to a significant number of publications on the subject in the post-war years (Finch & Woudstra 2020, 10-11). Consistent with the art history-centred and descriptive pattern of similar country house texts of the period, this manner of presentation continues with assessments of country house parklands such as *The English Landscape Garden* (Clark 1948). However, other works, including *Capability Brown* (Stroud 1950), *Humphrey Repton* (Stroud 1962), *William Kent: Architect, Designer, Painter, Gardener, 1685-1748* (Wilson 1984), and *Capability Brown and the Eighteenth-Century English Landscape* (Turner 1985) are demonstrative of what was a growing interest in the designers themselves, weaving together the biographical with an analysis of the design and construction of their parkland creations often referencing archival materials such as personal correspondence, blueprints and accounting figures. Echoing the artistic chronologies of country house architecture, works such as *The English Garden* (Fleming & Gore 1979), *The English Garden Tour* (Batey & Lambert 1990) and *Parks and Gardens* (Taigel & Williamson 1993) charted the stylistic evolution of these pleasure grounds, linking earlier forms of garden design

to the parkland landscapes in the manner of Brown, Repton and beyond. While the historical trajectory of country house and garden literature represents a transition from purely descriptive connoisseurship to more critical analyses, the following section outlines the interdisciplinary perspectives which have been used to critically assess the historic and contemporary country house, its objects, and estate landscapes within their wider social, political, economic, and ecological contexts. Furthermore, it considers similar shifts within their management and presentation as heritage objects.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

From the end of the twentieth century, scholarly assessments into the country house have reflected the postmodern turn discussed above (Waterfield 2012). Demonstrated by a growing body of socio-critical histories, these texts intersect country house studies with those of class and domestic servitude (Musson 2009; Sambrook 2005), gender and sexuality (Brownson & Solomons 2024; Smith & Sandell 2018; Lewis 2009; Lummis & Marsh 1993), and slavery and colonialism (Barczewski 2017; Dresser & Hann 2013). Furthermore, many of these interests have been similarly integrated into heritage programming at country house sites. In 2017, the National Trust ran a series of exhibitions at twenty-five properties highlighting LGBTQ histories to redress historical erasure and promote intersectional perspectives on heritage (National Trust n.d.a). The lives of domestic servants and the upstairs-downstairs relationship integral to the effective operation of estates have likewise been brought into the contemporary model of country house tourism. The later twentieth century witnessed a change in how these homes were presented to the visiting public through greater accessibility to service wings and outbuildings, from kitchens to laundry rooms and stables, including tactile experiences such as cooking or grooming that give the visitors a more active experience of place (National Trust 2022a; Keay 2012, 98-99; Smith 2006, 126-127; Samuel 1994, 160). In 2007, six country houses in Yorkshire took part in a multi-site exhibition titled 'Work and Play' which highlighted the experience of domestic servants and estate workers to illustrate to visitors what was required of these people to support the lifestyle of the estate families (YCHP n.d.). That same year, Harewood House, along with several other museums in the country hosted exhibitions related to the British involvement with the Atlantic slave trade with particular emphasis at Harewood given to the Lascelles family's explicit participation in historic slavery which funded the home's construction (Smith 2014, 261-265).

In a similar vein, these environmental features, both formal gardens and designed parklands, have been subject to more complex enquiries into their form and function, with analyses that go beyond the purely art historical, mirroring academic studies on the country house itself. Texts

such as Williamson's (1995) *Polite Landscapes* and Quest-Ritson's (2001) *The English Garden: A Social History* give to stately home gardens and parks the same treatment that Girouard (1974) gave the house itself, exploring the social functions of these landscapes in conjunction with their design. Indeed, Ritson states that 'garden history has been abducted by the art historians' (Quest-Ritson 2001, 1). Other assessments broaden in scope to further deconstruct these estate landscapes with reference to other forces at play in their creation and use. Floud's (2019) *Economic History of the English Garden*, Donington's (2023b) study on elite women and horticultural exoticism in Stobart's (2023) *Global Goods and the Country House*, and Lester & Colclough's (2024) *Capability Brown and the British Empire* link these landscapes to their national and global contexts.

Building on the rehabilitation of his image in the twentieth century, 2016 marked the tercentenary of Capability Brown's birth in 1716 and sparked a flurry of interest in the now-esteemed landscape designer. A multi-organisational event hosted by The Landscape Institute, The Capability Brown Festival included hundreds of events and over sixty exhibitions on the man and his work, hosted at various sites throughout the year (Landscape Institute 2016). As part of this celebration, a significant departure from standard critical analyses of Brown and his work was undertaken through the published conference proceedings, *What Did Capability Brown do*



Figure 5. Oakwood statue by sculptor Dan Cordell in Richmond Park, London (East Sheen Village/Facebook. In Twickenham News)

for Ecology? The legacy for biodiversity, landscapes, and nature conservation (Rotherham & Handley 2017). In this edited volume, landscape archaeologists, conservationists and ecologists contribute to the latest strand of historic parkland interpretation – its significance to ecology, biodiversity, and climate change. Though the connection between ecology and designed parklands had been made before (Rackham 2006 [2015]; 1976 [1993]), it had yet to be given such explicit focus in studies on the English landscape garden. Another interdisciplinary work following the tercentenary, *Capability Brown, Royal Gardener: The Business of Place-Making in Northern Europe* (Finch & Woudstra 2020), adds to the compendium on Brownian landscapes, expanding in scope to shed light not only the man and his work, but his legacy in international contexts. Of these, the former text on ecology in Brownian landscapes holds particular relevance to this work and highlights contemporary concerns in estate management and conservation on the environmental significance of these historic designed landscapes. Moreover, mirroring the intersectionality of improved representation and the integration of social histories and global contexts into country house museologies and interpretation, the grounds of these historic designed landscapes are increasingly promoted for the ecological significance. A five-metre wooden sculpture (Figure 5) unveiled in early 2025 in London's Richmond Park, calls attention to the importance of dead and decaying wood to parkland biodiversity and information points on ecology now pepper Holkham Park (see page 133).

The Country House in the Twentieth Century

Rather than concerning itself with the social, political, or artistic components of the country house and its environment in earlier periods, other publications post-*Destruction* explore the ways in which estate-owning families navigated the economic turmoil of the twentieth century. This interest in how the house and landed estate transitioned from a centre of economic and political power to established public heritage asset and the means by which elite families negotiated, or failed to negotiate, this adaptation is reflected in other works of the late twentieth century. David Littlejohn's (1997) *The Fate of the English Country House* and John Cornforth's (1998) *The Country Houses of England 1948-1998* are constructed almost as a life cycle, from birth to death and then revival during the later twentieth-century heritage boom. In *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, Peter Mandler (1997) engages more critically with the country house as a heritage asset and raises questions about their assumed value, tracing the changing fortunes of landed estates and their families during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within a contemporary heritage framework. In contrast to the socio-architectural and art historical works of earlier years, Mandler rejects the intrinsic value of the country house, instead suggesting it be understood through the evolution of the heritage industry in Britain and

questions their long-term sustainability. Heather Clemenson's (2021[1982]) *English Country Houses and Landed Estates* predates these texts by some years but belongs to much the same genre. Her survey of five hundred houses assesses the degree of estate contraction, manner of adaptive re-use, ownership transfer, and commercial diversification that estates underwent to survive. David Cannadine and Jeremy Musson's (2018) *The Country House: Past, Present, Future* blends the genres, looking at the relationship between country house architecture, social function and historical socio-political contexts, before exploring how these homes negotiated the financial struggles of the twentieth century, how they have adapted in contemporary society, and the way in which owners and directors have confronted difficult pasts and colonial legacies. Ben Cowell's (2024) *The British Country House Revival* takes a similarly contemporary approach and discusses their 'revival' during the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, analysing how these spaces have negotiated economic and political changes and contemporary issues such as decolonisation and legacies of exploitation. Clive Aslet's (2021) *The Story of the Country House* weaves together all these elements into a narrative that reaches from the origins of the country house in the medieval period to the means by which they navigated challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The negotiation of these issues has situated houses and estates, particularly those held by the National Trust, within a popular cultural and political debate. The following section sheds light on how this debate is indicative of a tension and active contestation between heritage paradigms and reflects a period of change and transition in the role and cultural significance of these houses and their wider estates.

The Contemporary Country House and the National Trust

As this research is concerned with contemporary forms of estate landscape use and its significance to academic perspectives and popular meaning, it is necessary to contextualise the present work within current social discourse around the subject. While this work is interested in the management practices and interpretive models of historic estates beyond simply those held by the National Trust, the past several years have witnessed the charity function as a reference point for a socio-political debate rooted in issues regarding heritage values, land use, and identity politics. Furthermore, the conservative polemic directed at the Trust in response to structural and interpretive changes within the organisation reveals how conflict between the authorised heritage discourse and postmodern heritage values play out in public dialogues. Moreover, as similar changes are taking place across independent estates, the debate over changing Trust directives carries implications about these landed estates at large.

In September 2020, The National Trust published their *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (Huxtable et al. 2020). This edited volume, which brought together experts from within and without the organisation, surveyed various historical narratives related to Britain's colonial past, from the global slave economy to abolitionism and the British Raj and identified ninety-three properties with links to British colonialism and historic slavery. In her contribution to the report, National Trust Senior Curator for London and the South East, Sophie Chessum (2020, 59-61), noted that this report was part of changing public interest in heritage in the twenty-first century that prioritises complex historical narratives and multi-vocality, in contrast to the 'traditional' twentieth-century country house experience with an interpretive focus on the lives and assets of the elite families. Accusations of a leftist political agenda and criticisms of 'wokeness' quickly followed (Fowler 2024, 6; Pyman 2022; Brown 2020) and Restore Trust, a 'forum where members, supporters and friends of the National Trust can discuss their concerns about the future of the charity', was formed in response that consists largely of current or ex-Trust staff, volunteers and members (Restore Trust n.d.).

That same year, an internal briefing document outlining a ten-year strategy was leaked and came under heavy criticism from similar groups, arguing that the 'tragic dumbing-down of the once-great National Trust continues, at breakneck speed' (Mount 2020a; Orna-Ornstein 2020). The focus of this criticism was regarding changing directives in country house management and interpretation that would 'dial-down' the Trust's position as a curatorial institution and move away from what the briefing referred to as the 'outdated mansion experience...serving a loyal but dwindling audience' which would include placing some collections in storage and reducing the number of exhibitions (Mount 2020b). The Trust did in fact undergo internal restructuring and laid off a significant number of staff including senior curators in response to financial losses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Hope 2021; White 2020), but the Trust's Director-General Hilary McGrady, who received death threats over the preceding documents (Sherwood 2022), has denied such allegations, claiming the brief was merely advisory for encouraging internal discussion and the Trust has no intention of lessening its dedication to curatorial excellence (Mount 2020b). Either way, this indictment is not new. *The Spectator* journalist, Harry Mount, published an article in 2017 titled 'How the National Trust is spoiling its treasures', in which he derided the development of family and child-orientated facilities and activities at several Trust houses, referring to them as 'National Trust Kiddy World' (Mount 2017).

Though some of the dust seems to have settled from the COVID-era heritage debates surrounding the National Trust's perceived knee-bending to 'woke ideologies' from their

publication on historic slavery, criticisms over their environmental and landscape recovery work invite further reflection on conservation dichotomies. Beyond conflict over the means of interpretation and claims that the National Trust is casting its commitment to traditional curation aside, the charity has found itself at the centre of a debate over land use with particular significance to its collection of historic estates (Figure 6). As part of a pledge to plant twenty million trees between 2020 and 2030 and create 250,000 hectares of nature-rich land between 2025 and 2035, the Trust has undertaken a considerable number of habitat creation and ‘rewilding’² projects. In response to this, the charity has received similar criticisms from media outlets and the Restore Trust over these issues. For example, plans to restore a degraded



Figure 6. Landscape debate in snapshot (Google)

historic water meadow and improve wetland biodiversity in Gloucestershire’s Sherborne Estate parkland designed by Charles Bridgeman have been met with disdain. In response to these plans, Ysenda Maxtone Graham wrote that ‘the National Trust is wrecking the Cotswolds’ (Graham 2024) and in Restore Trust’s diatribe against the initiative they cite a local who remarked that instead of maintaining a neat and tidy parkland, the Trust has ‘totally neglected’ the landscape (Restore Trust 2025). Further challenges to their nature recovery work, examined in more detail in Chapter 5, include contestations over sustainability strategies within non-heritage-listed commercial farming operations on these estates, pushing the Trust further into the heart of a wider socio-political debate about not just heritage values and management but land use at large.

While it may be possible to write-off some of the backlash regarding the Trust’s recent work as simply a kneejerk reaction in an age of ‘go woke, go broke’ identity politics, when taken into account the relationship between conservative politics and the authorised heritage discourse in

² The term rewilding as applied in this research is defined in Chapter 5, however, here the term is used in its generalised and popular sense meaning to fortify a particular area’s biodiversity and ecological health.

country house contexts, the significance of these dialogues to both popular and academic perspectives on the subject becomes clearer. It was said that the Trust's increased promotion of outdoor access, post-colonial narratives, accessibility, and person-centred experiences meant it was firmly standing in opposition to 'history, beauty, knowledge, facts and intellect' (Mount 2021). This dialogue is reflective then of a negotiation by two seemingly irreconcilable positions in heritage valuation: one that regards the value of the country house and its landscapes in contemporary England as a setting to intellectually engage with high culture and unchallenged historical narratives, and the other as a place to address contemporary concerns of social inclusion, environmental awareness, or simply as a space for family-friendly leisure. Moreover, debates around land use with reference to habitat creation schemes which increasingly characterise current approaches to estate management such as those pursued by the Trust, broaden the conceptual scope of this ideological polarity to encompass more comprehensive questions around the purpose and significance of landscapes in contemporary England. Though practical considerations may indeed be at play within these debates, the growing connection between anti-environmentalism and conservative politics in the West (Bonnett 2025) adds cultural depth to the conversation and strengthens linkages between discussions over land management and the cultural values appealed to through the authorised heritage discourse.

The evolution of heritage and museum theory and practice outlined above reflects a transition from an aesthetically-driven, expert-led and object-centred focus on monumentality and national significance to one which advocates for subjectivity, multi-vocality, community engagement and a focus on key contemporary issues and 'future-making' (Harrison 2006, 5-6). The cultural appeals made throughout much of the twentieth century in defence of the country house and their heritage significance centred on these earlier cultural values, invoked through the 'authorised heritage discourse' and systematically established and propped up by overarching heritage bodies such as UNESCO and ICOMOS. However, this top-down system of expert-led valuation has been increasingly challenged since the late twentieth century with greater emphasis on determining site and object significance through social value, intangibility, and inclusivity through the democratisation of cultural heritage and a focus on creating more sustainable futures through 'bottom-up' forms of community engagement – an 'alternative heritage discourse' which contests the 'authorised' (Davis 2008, 1-3). Shown above, a corresponding influence of social and critical thought has been developing within both historical and contemporary assessments into the country house and estate in academic

contexts since the late nineteenth century. This turn has shifted from a long standing twentieth-century tradition of an aesthetically-driven, art historical focus on country house architecture and gardens towards enquiries which position them within their wider social, political, economic, and environmental contexts from a critical lens. Yet a more recent and similar shift in the management and interpretation of the country house and its landscapes is now occurring, evidenced by the debates playing out regarding changing directives at the National Trust which carries significant implications on the evolution of their popular cultural and social meanings. More importantly, as this research will demonstrate, this shift is occurring across the industry rather than in isolation at the National Trust. This thesis positions itself within this debate to analyse the deeper meanings of this transformation in estate management and land use and the degree to which these developments challenge or contest the traditional social values of the country house which are expressive of the AHD. Moreover, it contextualises these estates within their wider socio-political, economic, and environmental contexts and histories to assess how these changes represent an adaptation to a rapidly changing world. The following chapter translates these theoretical questions into an active research design and lays the foundations for the objectives of this thesis by outlining the reflexive and iterative, qualitative research methodology undertaken, followed by the process by which research scope was refined and case study sites and participants were selected.

Chapter 3. Data Collection and Case Studies

3.1 Data Collection and Interview Methodology

The methods used for data collection in this research have been qualitative, centred on the use of interviews with key internal stakeholders. The motivation for this approach is an interest in the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes behind changing forms of estate landscape management rather than solely the quantitative indices of how it has changed. Visitor surveys were not pursued as the primary research focus regarding site-use centred on the significance of the house or parkland and potential shifts in visitor demographics, both of which have been derived through internal, site-based research and statistical data at estates for marketing and development purposes. Furthermore, this methodological focus on internal stakeholders provided valuable insight on the details of important developments in management practices and landscape and tourism strategies which have not been made public. As such, this approach sheds light on the tangible transformations occurring in estate landscapes as well as the social, political, and economic factors which have catalysed them. To deliver on this work's pursuit of a more experiential approach with broader implications, a methodology built around qualitative interviews has yielded quantitative information on land use as well as relevant personal reflections that allows for empirical extrapolation by making connections between results from participants across case study sites. The following sections will review how these interviews have been conducted, the process by which case study sites and interviewees were selected, the estates chosen and associated individuals interviewed, along with challenges encountered while negotiating research with particular estates.

Interview Process and Ethics

Before reviewing the case studies which have been evaluated for this thesis and the process by which research scope was negotiated and refined, this chapter will outline the epistemological frameworks which have informed the qualitative methods used. It will also touch on relevant considerations such as the positionality of the author, limitations in the sample set of participants and will review the ethical approval process required for research.

Positionality and Epistemology

Positionality is a critical consideration in qualitative research methods, referring to the researcher's perspective and worldview. These are shaped by the researcher's personal identities, experiences, values, and beliefs, informing and reflecting 'the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study' (Goundar 2025,1). During this

project, the researcher engaged with research participants as an outsider within an insider-outsider dynamic in two key areas. Firstly, as a non-British foreign national, the researcher's cultural background differs from that of the interview participants and is less saturated in the political, class-based cultural tensions discussed earlier around ideas of conservative, national nostalgia in country house preservation. Secondly, as an individual without experience in the estate or heritage industry in either visitor, landscape ecology, or farming contexts, the researcher has relied on a reflexive interview process. Within this, each new data set provided further insight into issues around landscape use in these contexts, thereby informing and refining both positionality and the overall interview process (Yip 2024, 223). While a purely binary understanding of the insider-outsider relationship has been contested (Eppley 2006), advantages of entering into qualitative research as the 'outsider' include the potential for reduced bias, presumed knowledge, and analytical detachment (Holmes 2022, 6).

Stemming from this position as an outsider, this research adopted a constructivist epistemological framework which relied on determining objective material realities to identify landscape change. Outlined in the research aims (see page 19), this thesis seeks to prove that tangible transformations in estate management are occurring in environmental and tourism contexts. Consequently, these changes needed to first be determined, before shifting towards an interpretivist research paradigm that allowed for interviewees to provide personalised insight into the driving factors and implications of these changes. The latter aligns with the broader, conceptual third research aim which seeks to identify the significance of this adaptive shift in heritage contexts. The following section details how interviewees were selected to deliver on this methodological focus and achieve the objectives of this research.

Interviewee Selection and Ethics

To gain the necessary information on material change and its implications, this thesis pursued a qualitative empirical research methodology centred on expert interviews. The expert interview is a 'qualitative interview...focusing on the knowledge of the expert, which is broadly characterised as specific knowledge in a certain field of action' and 'emphasises the importance of investigating experiences and perspectives of the interviewees for developing a better understanding of social reality' (Döringer 2021, 265-266). Therefore, internal stakeholders were sought for their positions as experts within their respective fields and roles in estate management to provide informed data on material and conceptual changes. In some cases, individuals held decades of experience which gave crucial insight into long-term developments in the industry, bolstering the utility of the dataset which seeks to understand transformations in landscape use and significance. The exact titles and nature of the roles differed across

properties, however, potential participants were selected based on their expert knowledge on the environmental and social components of the contemporary landed estate. Consequently, individuals contacted were those working in estate direction (3), operations and visitor experience management (4), farm and countryside management (6), sustainability management (2), house and collections management (1), tenant farming (1), and estate ownership and management (1).

Before conducting any research, ethical approval was given by the University of York's Research Ethics Committee and interviews were conducted in line with their requirements regarding informed consent and appropriate data storage in accordance with the university's GDPR guidelines. All research participants were given project briefs and written consent forms in advance of participation and no research was undertaken until these had been signed and returned to the researcher. These forms outlined their rights as research participants, highlighting voluntary consent and confidentiality. Participants were made aware that these interviews were non-anonymous, would be recorded and transcribed, and that participation could be revoked at any time. Names and job titles are used in the thesis to provide evidence of their roles as experts in their respective fields. Though not requested, several quotations were anonymised by the researcher merely out of respect for the participant if the researcher felt any dialogue might have been perceived as provocative or problematic by third parties.

The selection of stakeholder participants and the level of experience and insight which they have brought to this thesis has created a robust and informative dataset. However, there remains a sampling bias by focusing on the 'expert'. In this case, the experience of others, including the visiting public and local community are not represented in this research, although data provided by research participants did yield valuable information on the values and manner of engagement with these sites across these populations. Secondly, while one tenant farmer was interviewed, other data related to tenant farming on these estates has been similarly assessed solely through secondary source information provided by interviewees. Finally, due to issues around maintaining sustained contact, some individuals contacted as these sites for interview did not ultimately participate. As a result, it is necessary to acknowledge that through this purposive sampling bias and unforeseen issues, the experiential perspectives of other groups, both 'expert' and 'non-expert' has not been incorporated into the data set. However, this holds potential for future research, particularly amongst visitors and local communities which might be assessed through more extensive, qualitative survey methodologies. For individuals who participated in this research, once informed and written consent was given, both in-person

and remote interviews were undertaken, which are reviewed in more detail in the following sections along with how the raw data was coded and integrated into the thesis.

Interview Format

The data which has been gathered was collected through the use of conversational interviews, predominately one-to-one, but occasionally through group sessions. These interviews were semi-structured, with tailored content guides (see appendix 1) provided to participants in advance at the participant's preference. These guides included areas of interest specific to the site in question as well as on related generalities and those of broader scope. For example, site-specific questions enquired about changes in mowing practices at a particular house site, with more general queries about these strategies across the National Trust. Similar discussions with independent houses included both site-specific lines of questioning and those related to independent ownership more broadly, for example, 'what are some advantages or challenges to land management strategies at an independent house compared to one belonging to the National Trust?' These questions, as was made clear to interview participants, were not to be understood as rigidly defined, particularly regarding these more general, conceptual questions. Participants were encouraged to speak on other related topics which may not have been included in the pre-written line of questioning, nor were interviews restricted to these questions if the conversation took an interesting and relevant direction. That said, given the limited timeframe (most interviews were roughly one hour, with group sessions and site visits extending to roughly two, or two-and-a-half hours), the author did work to ensure the predetermined points of discussion were covered. These research sessions involved both remote interviews conducted by phone or video call, or face-to-face interviews and estate tours conducted through site visits.

Site Visits

Site visits with interviewee-led tours were specifically undertaken at Holkham Hall and Calke Abbey as they are principal case studies. These tours were conducted by Holkham's Sustainability Manager, Sue Penlington, and Calke Abbey's Countryside Manager, Jon Lewney. However, 'on-the-ground' research was also carried out at other sites to increase the depth of understanding through the value provided by engaging with these landscapes firsthand. Moreover, the integration of original site photographs provides visual material that facilitates better comparative reference. For example, the discussion about differences between healthy and unhealthy hedgerow maintenance (Chapter 4.2), is improved by the inclusion of relevant images for both the author and reader. Secondly, site visits were also pursued for purposes of group discussions for purely practical reasons – it simply being more conducive to productive

conversation than group video calls. For instance, while some photographs were taken during the author's first visit to Calke Abbey, the primary purpose for travel was to take part in a pre-arranged table discussion with three members of staff. In addition to Calke Abbey and Holkham Hall, site visits were also conducted at Burton Constable Hall, Beningbrough Hall, Hardwick Hall, Wimpole Hall, Mapperton, and Osterley Park. Of these, visits to Burton Constable Hall and Hardwick Hall included staff-led tours, given by Grounds and Parkland Officer, Dave Nassau (Burton Constable) and Lead Ranger, Steve Sadler (Hardwick Hall). Overall, it was possible to gather the majority of information required through remote interviews, but those alone would have been insufficient for purpose, particularly in reference to ecologically-driven changes in estate landscape management. Site visits were not undertaken for Bowood House, Harewood House or Hatfield House, as research on Bowood was limited to a text-based questionnaire at the participant's preference and at the time of research, Harewood's landscape redevelopment strategy has been in its early stages. At Hatfield, the environmental and regenerative work strongly aligns with that of Holkham's and as such, a remote interview was sufficient for the requisite data.

Data Analysis and Integration

Interviews were recorded digitally, either to an external recording device for telephone and face-to-face interviews or internally through video-call software, either Zoom or Teams. These digital recordings were then transcribed using the automated speech-to-text transcription software Otter.ai. These transcripts were then reviewed manually and edited for accuracy but kept verbatim (see appendix 2), including any stutters or filler words. Quotations were then integrated into their relevant thematic sections and further edited and condensed for clarity and readability. Additionally, beyond relevant data from more direct lines of questioning, for example, how mowing is approached at a particular property, interviews were scanned to assess where other pertinent observations were made. This was particularly useful in drawing out much of the broader socio-cultural and economic contexts of these changes in estate management, and commonalities between interviewee responses were noted to determine key overarching themes. As this work has focused on the personal experiences and perspectives of research participants, quotations were used directly, rather than through qualitative coding systems to provide a richer and more narrative data set. In instances where greater context has been helpful for clarity, dialogue between the author and interviewee was kept, rather than limiting included quotations specifically to interviewee commentary. Moving to the case studies themselves, the following section introduces the specific estates selected for this research, outlining how their varying ownership models and geographical configurations serve as the

essential testing grounds for investigating this contemporary turn towards the landscape amongst historic estates.

3.2 Case Studies: The Estates

There were several considerations in choosing country house sites for assessment and consultation in this research. The following section will review these with reference to how this work's thematic structure was renegotiated and refined while undertaking research in an iterative and reflective critical process, followed by a survey of the estates (Table 1, Figure 7) which participated in this project.

<i>Calke Abbey</i>	National Trust	Derbyshire	2,471	496,694
<i>Beningbrough Hall</i>	National Trust	North Yorkshire	357	175,516
<i>Hardwick Hall</i>	National Trust	Derbyshire	2,500	307,274
<i>Osterley Park</i>	National Trust	Greater London	500	61,007
<i>Wimpole Hall</i>	National Trust	Cambridgeshire	2,500	370,379
<i>Holkham Hall</i>	Independent (Private)	Norfolk	25,000	300,000
<i>Bowood House</i>	Independent (Private)	Wiltshire	4,000	120,000
<i>Burton Constable Hall</i>	Independent (Charity)	East Yorkshire	330	46,000
<i>Harewood House</i>	Independent (Charity)	West Yorkshire	140	290,000
<i>Hatfield House</i>	Independent (Private)	Hertfordshire	7,800	250,000
<i>Mapperton House</i>	Independent (Private)	Dorset	1,900	15,000

Table 1. List of estates which participated in this research. Visitor numbers for NT sites are from their 2024-2025 annual report. Independent numbers were given by interviewees during research. Note: all NT properties and independent charities are registered museums and thus subject to particular charitable mandates under their management regimes.

Site Selection and Thematic Structure

Preliminary investigations were broader in scope, exploring how a wider array of historic estates across the United Kingdom have pivoted to address contemporary environmental and social concerns. Consequently, this research has been solely interested in estates which have revised their systems of landscape management to address environmental issues with visitor-facing heritage-tourism components. Initially, this included sites across a geographic and

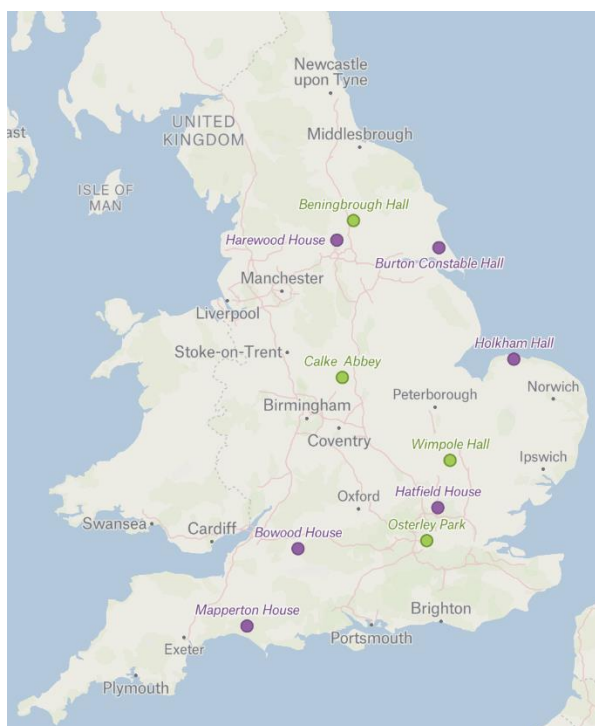


Figure 7. Location of sites in England which have participated in this research. independent properties in purple, Trust-owned in green. Sources: Ordnance Survey 2025 [Feltmaps], (base map by author, 2026)

topographical range, including both lowland and upland estates in the devolved nations of Great Britain. However, a number of issues quickly condensed this range of sites down to the lowland estates in England which are reflected in the sample. The reasons for this can be divided into practical and conceptual considerations. Firstly, as this research is interested in the integration of environmental strategies in historic estate management, the devolution of agri-environmental and heritage policy in the UK adds compounding variables in analysing sites between countries. Secondly, potential issues of travel distance further played a role in restricting case study sites to England. For instance, the MacLeod estate on Isle of Skye has been

working on a large-scale woodland creation scheme since 2010, planting 452,000 native, mixed species trees, part of which has replaced a previous, post-war monoculture conifer plantation on the estate (Dunvegan 2021). While the researcher had been interested in this project and its attendant habitat creation work, its distance to the researcher's location in York raised concerns regarding the potential need for travel.

Following the decision to limit research scope to England, other considerations isolated case study sites to lowland estates, coalescing around developments in historic parkland and arable farmland, presented in Chapters 4.1 and 4.2, respectively. Both forms of land use are predominant across vast numbers of estates, regardless of size, location and depth of commercial interests. For instance, the National Trust is restoring 2,200 acres of degraded peatland in Dartmoor, in coordination with the Duchy of Cornwall (National Trust 2021a), but while this might fit within a larger pattern of estate-based conservation efforts, its size and topography require unique conservation practices which make it more challenging to draw parallels with lowland estate landscapes. In contrast, parks and arable farmland allow for more effective comparison between otherwise dissimilar sites. Estates across a broad range of sizes and ownership types typically contain some form of historical parkland and arable farm, unlike more unique topographical features such as coastal habitats (Cadland n.d.), heathland

(National Trust 2024c) or peat bogs (Dunvegan 2021), though the value of these habitats to contemporary ‘eco-estates’ is well acknowledged. By focusing on these landscape types, a small, charity-owned house such as Burton Constable Hall can be compared to a large, commercially-orientated estates such as Hatfield House through their shared Capability Brown-designed parklands. By incorporating arable landscapes, comparisons can be similarly drawn between sustainable farming systems implemented at estates under different management regimes such as Wimpole (National Trust) and Holkham (independent). While this research has focused on designed parkland and arable farming landscapes, investigation into environmental strategies among them quickly uncovered significant trends in landscape recovery, habitat creation and rewilding schemes. Hence, while large-scale upland restoration schemes were excluded from this work, nature recovery projects taking place within the confines of the nuclear estate and its peripheral farmland have been incorporated into this work and are analysed in Chapter 5.

Beyond the practical concerns of geographic scope, topography, and political variables, there were additional thematic and conceptual factors that contributed to defining the investigative remit of this research. As this work is interested in these country houses and their landscapes as heritage sites, the historical antecedents of parkland and arable farmland on England’s estates situate it within a long and easily identifiable landscape history (Clemenson 1982 [2021], 59, 74-75; Finch 2019, 80; Williamson 1998, 9, 18; Robinson 1988, 7-8). Furthermore, the post-war transformation of the country house and parkland into nationalising heritage sites (see Chapter 2.3) and the concurrent industrialisation of estate farming (see Chapter 4.2) are critical reference points for ideological shifts in twenty-first-century estate management. Moreover, as popular heritage tourism destinations which have been subject to academic enquiry by scholars such as Hewison (1987) and Smith (2006), the role of the heritage-listed, designed landscapes of the nuclear estate as a visitor destination is a significant consideration. Consequently, house sites which are not publicly accessible, despite the presence of environmental work, have been excluded from this research. This also includes estates which engage the public exclusively outside heritage-based commercial operations (e.g., weddings or corporate hires). For example, the owners of Little Massingham House in Norfolk have undertaken a variety of environmental schemes on their 2,000-acre estate, part of a larger nature-based movement in East Anglia called ‘Wild East’ (Wild East 2024; Youens n.d.). However, while those criteria certainly make it relevant to the landscape ecology portion of this research, their commercial operations are strictly limited to holiday accommodation and business and leisure hires, without a significant external appeal to its history or heritage.

Finally, estates of varying sizes within the parameters listed above were selected to achieve a representative sample. A similar range of estate sizes between National Trust and independent properties was pursued to provide further parallels between them. For example, a large independent estate such as Holkham can be referenced against Wimpole (National Trust), or a smaller estate such as Burton Constable (independent) to Beningbrough Hall (National Trust). These sites are reviewed in the following section, along with a brief overview of each estate's general context. This primarily includes ownership, style and period of construction, estate size, and location, along with any pertinent information related to how and why it was chosen for study. They have been ordered by organisation, with National Trust properties first, followed by those in independent ownership. The primary case studies for each, Calke Abbey and Holkham, are presented first within their respective sections, followed by sites consulted to support and complement those principal estates.

The National Trust

With 259,985 hectares of land under their control, the National Trust undoubtedly sits at the centre of any discussions around land use in the United Kingdom, particularly in England where the majority of its land and properties lie (National Trust 2024a, 10). Similarly, their portfolio of country houses figures prominently in the middle-class cultural milieu of the late twentieth-century in Britain, popularly associated with clichés of pensioners and Labrador owners touring homes before enjoying a cream tea (Rasen & Lewney 2023, 415, 418; Shrubsole 2019, 237; Henley 2015; Smith 2006, 129-130). It was a perceived disconnect between this cultural stereotype and hypothesis-led suppositions regarding visitor site usage that encouraged further interest in how popular imagery such as this might be problematised by the primary role that landscapes play in contemporary estate tourism. Additionally, questions arose of how the conservative, nostalgia-driven house tour experience observed in heritage assessments (Fowler 2020; Smith 2016; 2006; Hewison 1987; Wright 1985 [2009]) may contrast with a progressive focus on environmentalism and social wellbeing in these houses' wider landscapes. While the Trust's pivot back towards environmental and social issues reaches back to 2001 under the directorship of Fiona Reynolds (Young 2016, 222-223), it has rapidly gained pace in recent years. In 2015, the National Trust published their 10-year strategy, 'Playing Our Part', which explicitly reaffirmed their longstanding commitment to both historic preservation and a renewed emphasis on environmental conservation, which can be interpreted as a gentle pivoting back towards their beginnings as a nature-based conservation charity. In this publication they make the following statement in its introduction:

‘Too often over the last 70 years, farming practices have put short-term production ahead of the long-term health of the land and the natural environment. Wildlife has disappeared from our fields and hedgerows, over-worked soils wash out to sea and towns and villages flood. A changing climate will bring even greater challenges. We need to find a new way to manage land’ (National Trust 2015, 4).

As part of this commitment to environmental concerns, the National Trust has been working on a number of projects including a goal of 25,000 hectares of restored habitats by 2025, hedgerow and tree planting schemes and a target of 50% of all farmland being ‘nature-friendly’ which requires better management of hedges, field margins and other critical habitats (National Trust n.d.b). With roughly 80% of their landholdings being farmed in some way, they are one of the largest single recipients of governmental farming subsidies and helped to push for subsidy reform to determine payments based on environmental stewardship (Shrubsole 2019, 243). That said, this pivot towards delivering environmental gains has not come without criticism. Alongside the socio-political critiques of journalists and the advocacies of Restore Trust discussed in Chapter 2, the Trust has received complaints regarding its implementation of nature recovery strategies and their management of farmland (Gatten 2025). As such, The National Trust is representative of the discourse around the transformation of these estate landscapes, and it is impossible to have a conversation about these shifts without assessing the role of the charity in achieving them. Consequently, five of the eleven house sites assessed in the study are National Trust properties.

Calke Abbey

Calke Abbey is a Baroque mansion in located in Ticknall, Derbyshire, roughly eleven miles south of Derby (SK 36523 22683) (Historic England 1984a). The house sits in an estate of around 2,471 acres of historic parkland and tenanted farmland, with Calke Park consisting of about 600 acres. The current house was built by Sir John



Figure 8. Calke Abbey, south front. The small parcels of lawn immediately surrounding the house are the only areas of the parkland that are mown (author's photo)

Harpur between 1702 and 1704, although the architect responsible for its Baroque design is unknown. The parkland was redesigned under his grandson, Sir Harry, during the 1770-80s by William Emes (1729-1803), a follower of Capability Brown (Historic England 1984a). Replacing a previous geometrical scheme of planting, Emes' design is relatively consistent with the park as it exists today, including the introduction of Portland sheep and herds of deer (Jenkins & Drury 1988, 491-492). A family marked by an eccentric interest in scientific and antiquarian collecting and a proclivity for reclusiveness, the house, its contents and surroundings are a 'unique historical document' (Jenkins & Drury 1988, 495). When Charles Harpur-Crewe died in 1981, substantial death duties made it necessary to relinquish ownership. Between funding from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and funds

raised by the National Trust, ownership passed to the latter in 1985 (National Trust n.d.c). It was this 'unique historical document' that drew the Trust towards its acquisition, with a particular interest in the estate's wood-pasture landscape of its historic parkland and its high proportion of valuable ancient and veteran trees (Taylor *et al.* 2023). Since then, the house has been managed in a state of preserved decay, fashioned as the 'un-stately, stately home' (National Trust n.d.d), with peeling interiors and a visitor experience more akin to a cabinet of curiosities than a staged historic house. That designation as the 'un-stately, stately home' has historically allowed for a greater degree of aesthetic freedom within the park since its acquisition by the Trust and has provided an opportunity for the charity to promote and model ecologically-driven parkland management strategies in contrast to the prioritisation of tidiness in previous generations. Calke Abbey was initially pursued as a case study for biodiversity-driven parkland management practices promoted on the property's webpage which cites substantial dead wood collections (National Trust n.d.e). A preliminary unrecorded conversation was held by video call with Jon Lewney, Calke's Countryside Manager, who discussed the estate's longstanding focus



Figure 9. Interior of Calke Abbey showing its state of disrepair and a small part of its natural history collection (author's photo)

on environmental sustainability in the parkland, leading to its selection as the primary case study for environmentally-focused parkland management.

Following this initial off the record conversation, independent research at Calke Abbey was undertaken on three separate occasions. Firstly, a site visit was undertaken which included a group interview with Lewney, along with Caroline Taylor and Alannah Rasen, who work as the Visitor Operations & Experience Manager and Experience & Visitor Programming Manager, respectively. This was followed by a return visit which involved a tour of the parkland and wider estate with Jon Lewney. A final interview was held remotely with Bill Cove, Calke's previous Countryside Manager who had worked for the estate since before the National Trust took ownership.

Beningbrough Hall

Beningbrough Hall is a Baroque mansion located in Newton-on-Ouse, North Yorkshire, eight miles northwest of York (SE 51753 58851) (Historic England 1984b). The house sits within 357-acres of historic parkland which is grazed by the estate's sole tenant farmer. Following the



Figure 10. Beningbrough Hall, north front (author's photo)

Dissolution, the former monastic lands which Beningbrough now sits on passed into private hands and was inherited by Ralph Bouchier in 1556, who maintained a house on the estate. His descendant, John Bouchier (1684-1736), inherited the estate

in 1700 and after partaking in the Grand Tour, hired William Thornton to design a new house, completed in 1716, which stands today (Constantine n.d.). After John Bouchier's death, the estate passed into the hands of Margaret (1739-1827) and Giles Earle (1732-1811) in 1761. With no surviving heirs, the estate passed from the Earles to the Dawnay family from 1832 to 1917, when Guy Dawnay decided to auction off the estate while stationed in Europe during the First World War. Some tenants bought their own property, while the house and 357-acres of surrounding park, a fraction of its former 6,100 acres, were sold to Enid, Lady Chesterfield (1878-1957), who became Beningbrough's last private owner before her surviving family transferred ownership to the Trust in lieu of death of duties in 1958 (Simon 1992, 24-25, 28; Constantine n.d.).

Beningbrough Hall was selected for study due to its relatively small estate size and its freely accessible parkland which can be easily accessed through Newton-on-Ouse village. Moreover, its ease of access and proximity to urban York was another factor in identifying the house as a case study. Following selection, preliminary research revealed minimal changes in visitor numbers during a recent period of time in which the house was closed for refurbishment, which led to important interview questions about the value of parkland as a primary visitor destination. An interview was held with Alexa Buffey, Beningbrough's Collections & House Manager, which yielded key information on internal focus and strategies at the National Trust, but further research interviews on environmental factors were ultimately not pursued as a result of the site's land management structure wherein the majority of it is managed by their tenant farmers, with limited intervention from the Trust.

Hardwick Hall

Hardwick Hall is an Elizabethan prodigy house situated within a roughly 2,500-acre estate that lies across county lines between Ault Hucknall, Derbyshire and Ashfield, Nottinghamshire (SK 46496 64072). The estate includes areas of wetlands, woodlands, tenanted farmland and some 1,000 acres of parkland

(Historic England 1984c).

Hardwick Hall was built by one of the richest women of her age, Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, better known as Bess of Hardwick (circa 1521-1608). Before

beginning the

construction of her first

home, Hardwick Old Hall, on the Hardwick estate in 1587, she and her husband, Sir William Cavendish (1505-1557) built and resided at Chatsworth House near Bakewell, Derbyshire, which remains the home of the Dukes of Devonshire (Chatsworth 2026). After the death of her fourth husband, the Earl of Shrewsbury, in 1590, Bess of Hardwick undertook an extensive new building project, the New Hall, alongside concurrent renovations of the Old Hall which now sits in ruin beside it (National Trust n.d.f). Designed and built by Robert Smythson, Hardwick New Hall was completed in 1597 and has been considered 'among the most magnificent great houses of the Elizabethan period' (Riden & Fowkes 2009, 1). Upon Bess of Hardwick's death in



Figure 11. Hardwick Hall, west front (author's photo)

1608, the estate passed to her son, William Cavendish (1551-1626), 1st Earl of Devonshire. The estate remained in the hands of the Dukes of Devonshire until Andrew Cavendish, 11th Duke of Devonshire transferred the Hall, 1,000 acres of parkland, and further agricultural land to the National Trust in 1958 in lieu of death duties following his father's death in 1950 (Riden & Fowkes 2009,162). Since then, it has become one of the National Trust's flagship properties, with 266,663 ticketed visitors between 2023 and 2024 (National Trust 2024a).

Hardwick was selected for study after learning about environment-focused changes taking place on the estate through conversations with National Trust staff at Calke Abbey. These include changes to parkland management, the adoption of regenerative principles on their tenanted farmland, wood-pasture creation projects and increased outdoor visitor offerings. Moreover, as such a well-known and architecturally significant house (National Trust n.d.g), there was a research interest in the potential juxtaposition of its presentation against an increasingly less manicured parkland, in contrast to Calke Abbey where the 'un-stately' aesthetic is equally reflected in the house and grounds. At Hardwick, research involved a group interview session with Steve Sadler, the estate's lead Ranger and Visitor Operations & Experience Manager, Matt Dillon, followed by a tour of the estate led by Sadler. A follow-up conversation to revisit key points was held by telephone call with Sadler.

Osterley Park

Osterley Park is a country house remodelled in a neoclassical style which straddles the London boroughs of Hounslow and Ealing (TQ 14414 78372). It sits within a roughly 500-acre estate, about 300 of which are managed by the property's sole tenant farmer. Originally a Tudor house built in the 1570s for Sir Thomas Gresham, the estate changed hands frequently until it was sold



Figure 12. Osterley Park, east front (author's photo)

to Sir Francis Child (c. 1684-1740) in 1711. His grandson, Sir Francis Child (1735-1763) inherited the property in 1752 and hired Robert Adam in the 1760s to remodel the exterior and interior to a contemporary classical style with a

spacious portico that welcomes visitors into its grand and ornamental interiors (Historic England 1987a). Previous formal gardens were swept away at the same time and replaced by an

informal, naturalistic parkland, of which roughly 140 acres remains (National Trust Collections n.d.). The estate passed into the hands of the Jersey family in 1804 when Sir Francis Child's great niece, who had inherited the estate, married the fifth Earl of Jersey (Historic England 1987a). It remained under their ownership until the 9th Earl passed the house and grounds to the National Trust in 1949 after amassing extensive debts. However, it was given without an endowment, and financial issues forced the National Trust to lease it to the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Public Works Department who managed the house and grounds, respectively, until the Trust took over direct management in 1991 (Hounslow Connect 2025; Eddy 2023, 799).

Osterley's interior designs are notably one of Adam's finest and most complete, which have been a selling point for the Trust since it acquired the house in 1949 (National Trust 2024d). In fact, Osterley's interior rooms have been one of its most striking features since its construction. During correspondence with the Countess of Ossory, Horace Walpole remarked about his visit to Osterley that he had gone to see 'the palace of palaces' with rooms 'worthy of eve before the fall'. In contrast, Walpole abruptly notes that 'the park is the ugliest spot of ground in the universe' (Walpole 1773, 71). However, the primary reason for visiting Osterley Park today is not the exquisite Robert Adam interiors, but the surrounding parkland which serves as a valuable green oasis in the middle of Hounslow, London. It was this unique relationship between the estate and its surroundings which marked it as a relevant case study. It is rare that a house and grounds such as Osterley are flanked by dense urban spaces, raising questions about how its outdoor spaces are managed internally as well as used and perceived by the public. While other sites in this research have strong links with local communities, Osterley Park is the only example which functions more or less as a municipal park, with twenty-four-hour access through the grounds (Eddy 2023, 802, 806-807). Moreover, as a country house, it is unusual in that the surrounding community is particularly diverse, with over 50% of Hounslow borough residents identifying as 'non-white' with the majority of those being Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh (National Statistics 2021).

A remote interview was held with Andy Eddy, Osterley's Head Gardener. A site visit and interview with a member of the estate's visitor experience team was planned but did not ultimately take place.

Wimpole Hall

Wimpole hall is a neoclassical mansion in Cambridgeshire, roughly ten miles southwest of Cambridge (TL 33552 50994) (Historic England 1967). At its apex in the nineteenth century, the



Figure 13. Wimpole Hall, south front (author's photo)

estate spanned a contiguous 11,000 acres, with an additional 8,000 elsewhere in the Cambridgeshire Fens (Souden 1991, 88; 91). Today the house is situated within a much reduced 2,500-acre estate, including tenanted farmland, a 750-acre Home Farm, the only one of its kind within the Trust, and 500 acres of historic parkland which retains features from a number of famed landscape designers including Charles Bridgeman, Capability Brown, and Humphrey Repton (National Trust n.d.h; National Trust n.d.i) The house has its origins in the seventeenth century when Thomas Chicheley built a new hall on his family's estate. Chicheley sold the estate in 1684, and it passed through three more owners until it was purchased by Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke in 1740 (Historic England 1985). His grandson, the 3rd Earl of Hardwick (1757-1834), had a noted interest in agricultural improvement and contemporary commentators observed that, 'his lordship's farming establishment is on a very extensive scale; and, from every improved method in agriculture being judiciously introduced, the produce of his grounds is yearly increasing' (Britton & Brayley 1801, 125-126). However, the 5th Earl (1836-1897) amassed extensive gambling debts and was forced to auction off large portions of the estate before selling the hall and a remaining 7,304 acres (Steeple Morden 2024). Wimpole passed to the hands of the 6th and then 7th Viscounts Clifden from 1894 until it was purchased by Captain George and Mrs Elsie Bambridge in 1942. Financial difficulties following his death led to numerous demolitions across the estate after the Second World War until Mrs Bambridge bequeathed the estate to the National Trust in 1976 (National Trust n.d.h)

Wimpole Hall is unique among the National Trust's portfolio of country houses through its in-hand, organic-certified Home Farm. While in-hand grazing is common at other historic estates owned by the Trust, Wimpole is the only site which operates an arable Home Farm. As a large estate with substantial interests in regenerative farming, Wimpole Hall was selected as an important case study site to serve as a comparator to other large, independently-owned estates with in-hand sustainable farming operations such as Holkham and Hatfield. To undertake research at Wimpole, a remote interview was held with the estate's Farm and Countryside Manager, David Hassall, followed by an independent site-visit.

As a national institution, the National Trust's transition towards sustainable land use is inherently tied to its overarching charitable mandate and broader public accountability. Yet, the majority of English estates fall outside their remit. To provide a robust, comparative critique of contemporary land management, it is crucial to examine properties operating outside this management framework. The following section introduces the estates under independent ownership selected for this study – ranging from multi-generational family inheritances to private charitable trusts – shedding light on how autonomous landowners negotiate the intersecting pressures of environmental sustainability and economic survival without the constraints, or safety net, of centralised institutional backing.

Independent Sites

Of the six independent sites included in this work, five of those are members of Historic Houses, while Hatfield House is unaffiliated with the organisation. However, as the majority of independent sites in this work are members and as a representative body of hundreds of other independent country houses and estates, this section will provide context to the organisation and its defining objectives. Historic Houses (previously known as the Historic Houses Association) is a country house cooperative of private and independently-owned historic homes and estates, the origins of which were intertwined with fears over inheritance taxation during the post-war welfare state years. Originally formed as a sub-committee of the British Tourist Authority, the Historic Houses Association (HHA) was made an independent body in 1973 (Historic Houses 2023d). When the new Labour government took power in 1974, they had pledged to introduce a series of taxes to fund various pieces of social policy. In opposition to the Wealth and Capital Transfer taxes which would be levied not least on country house owners, a campaign was launched in protest that saw cooperation between the newly formed HHA and the National Trust whose interest in country house conservation had been firmly established in the aftermath of the Second World War (Porter 2022; Glennerster 2012, 8). That same year, the British Tourist Authority commissioned a financial report by John Cornforth, the bleak results of

which went on to inspire the Victoria & Albert exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House* (Strong, Binney & Harris 1974, 6). While Labour's new tax legislation never came to fruition, the HHA had been inaugurated as a representative and lobbying organisation on behalf of the nation's independently-owned stately homes. Since then, Historic Houses has continued to expand and is now made up of a membership of some 1500 independent houses, castles and gardens representing a vast array of sites that are diverse in age, size, commercialisation, and system of ownership. That diversity has been factored into this research as a means of comparing and contrasting changes in landscape and estate management against variations in house types. For instance, Holkham Hall holds substantial commercial ventures and residential properties and their ownership structure has remained unchanged over the centuries. In contrast, Burton Constable Hall and Grounds are owned by a registered charity that functions largely as a house museum with family-orientated recreational offerings akin to homes cared for by the National Trust. Consequently, questions arose over how environmental interests have been integrated into management plans under these different regimes. In addition, there was an interest in observing possible variances in how the designed parklands of such contrasting estates might factor into their use as heritage destinations.

Unlike the National Trust, Historic Houses is not an ownership body and therefore does not make strategic or operational decisions on behalf of their member properties, fostering individuality and allowing for unique and sometimes experimental management methods. However, there are a number of values that as a representative body they highlight as indicative of their members and work to support through intra-organisational networking, guidance, workshops and political lobbying. Similar to the focus on human wellbeing currently being promoted by the National Trust (National Trust n.d.j; National Trust 2025c), Historic Houses promotes their member properties as supporting 'health and wellbeing activities' wherein 'community groups and individual visitors find their mental and physical health boosted by access to beauty, nature and open spaces' (Historic Houses 2023c). Furthermore, they have cited environmental sustainability as a core tenet of their ideological platform and have integrated these concerns into their lobbying efforts. In their words,

'Our member places are already taking a lead in reducing their carbon footprint and environmental impact, and in preserving and restoring natural habitats. If given the right support, they could do more, and we do all we can to raise awareness of the leading role heritage can play in environmental sustainability, highlighting exciting and innovative examples of our member houses' work in this area – from rewilding ancient estates and

investing in renewable energy generation, to making reducing, reusing and recycling a core part of the visitor experience' (Historic Houses 2023b).

The independent and predominantly Historic Houses member properties which feature in this research range in size, age, level of commercial focus, and ownership structure. Three of them belong to a smaller heritage consortium, the Treasure Houses of England, which consists of ten of the finest and most significant independent stately homes in terms of architecture, landscape design, art collections, and visitor numbers. Conversations with interviewees at Treasure Houses consulted for this work have commented on interconnectivity among the consortium and they maintain a conversational network which facilitated contact between locations for research.

Holkham Hall

One of England's Treasure Houses, Holkham Hall is a Palladian mansion located thirty-two miles northeast of King's Lynn on the North Norfolk coast (TF 87275 42293) (Historic England 1987b). Holkham's 25,000-acre estate is the largest in Norfolk and in addition to its tenanted



Figure 14. Holkham Hall north front and lawn (author's photo)

and Home farms includes roughly 3,000 acres of parkland and 10,000 acres of National Nature Reserve along the Norfolk coastline which consists of a variety of mixed habitats, from sandy coastal dunes, to marshlands and pine woodlands (Holkham 2026a; Holkham 2026b). It was built between 1734 and 1764 by Thomas Coke, the 1st Earl of Leicester and has remained owned by the Coke family since then (Historic England 2024). Holkham Estate has declared that their 'vision is to be the UK's most pioneering and sustainable rural estate' (Holkham 2025a) and this

mission directive sits at the core of how they manage their nearly 4,000 hectares of farmland. These natural spaces are managed in adherence with their sustainability goals which in 2020 were strengthened through the creation of an internal strategy named WONDER which centres on three core tenants: pioneering environmental gain, championing low carbon living and stamping out waste (Holkham 2025b). Holkham's interest in environmental and agronomic pursuits is part of a longer family history and figures heavily in their contemporary interpretive materials (Figure 15). The 1st Earl of Leicester (7th creation), Thomas William Coke (1754-1842) was the great nephew of the 'first' 1st Earl of Leicester, Thomas Coke (1697-1759) who funded and oversaw construction of Holkham Hall, though he died before he saw his home finished. Despite his role in constructing the hall, it is Thomas *William* Coke who looms larger in Holkham's history and legacy. He inherited the estate upon the death of his father in 1776 and became renowned as an agricultural reformer. Coke began hosting yearly 'sheep-shearings', agricultural fairs which were said to effectively 'spread agricultural enlightenment' by sharing technological advancements and the latest agronomical insights (Holkham n.d.). The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Holkham continue to modernise with the addition of various features, from heated glasshouses to electricity, but like many other stately homes, Holkham found itself in a precarious financial position around the Second World War, with transfer to the National Trust even being considered at one point during the 1940s. In 1978, under the 7th Earl, Holkham revived the country shows held there by Thomas William Coke in the nineteenth century, helping to reignite Holkham's dedication to rural matters of agriculture and conservation. This renewed vigour in agronomic and environmental interests has been maintained and expanded upon since Thomas Edward Coke, now the 8th Earl, took over management of the estate in 2005 (Holkham n.d.). This agricultural legacy features prominently in the estate's identity and the current Earl



Figure 15. Part of the exhibition on the estate's sustainability strategies at Holkham Hall visitor centre (author's photo)

promotes and upholds this historic tradition: ‘we’re not being clever. We’re just going back to what my four-great-grandfather did 250 years ago in the agricultural revolution’ (Marsh 2021).

Holkham serves as a principal case study in sustainable farming as a result of their position at the forefront of regenerative estate agriculture. This environmental work, spearheaded by the estate’s conservation manager, Jake Fiennes since 2018, is featured in his popular and well-received book, *Land Healer* (Fiennes 2022). Furthermore, they have recently integrated environmental work elsewhere on the estate including changes in parkland maintenance which mirror the approach at Calke Abbey. Remote interviews were held separately with Holkham’s Head of Enterprises, Leigh Hitchcock, and Sue Penlington, who served as Holkham’s Education Manager from 2013 to 2020 and the estate’s Sustainability Manager since then. A follow-up site visit was subsequently made with Penlington which involved a tour of Holkham’s estate including its parkland and arable farmland.

Bowood House

While the main house was demolished in 1955, the current Bowood House, originally built as service courts and an orangery, is a converted country house in the classical style, located thirty-two miles east of Bristol, Wiltshire (ST 97481 69950) (Historic England 1972). Called ‘the



Figure 16. Bowood House (Bowood n.d.e)

epitome of an eighteenth-century English country house’ (Fraser 2024), Bowood House sits at the centre of a large 4,000-acre estate which includes 2,000 acres of

parkland designed by Capability Brown (Bowood n.d.a; Bowood n.d.b). The original house and now converted buildings were constructed in stages between 1755 and 1774 by Henry Keene and Robert Adam, commissioned by the 1st Marquess of Lansdowne and remains under the original ownership of the Fitzmaurice family (Historic England 1972). Following decades of

dilapidation, the main house at Bowood was vacated during the Second World War, and designs to convert the service wings and orangery had been drawn up as early as 1947. It was under the 8th Marquess of Lansdowne, who proceeded with the demolition and remodelling of the property in 1955 (Goodall 2025). It is currently home to the 9th Marquess and Marchioness of Lansdowne, and their son, Lord Kerry who manages the estate.

Bowood Estate hosts a variety of commercial enterprises, including dining, leisure and sport offerings alongside a more traditional heritage tourism business that operates for most of the year. In addition to non-landscape-based sustainability strategies such as the phasing out of single-use plastics and the development of a comprehensive recycling facility across their business ventures, they have pursued eco-friendly management strategies within its roughly Grade I listed parkland, including changes to mowing and grazing regimes. Moreover, Bowood has spent the last fifty years undertaking periodic tree planting work, with over 1.2 million trees being planted across the estate during that time (Bowood n.d.c). These efforts, discussed on the estate's website, led to research interest. Correspondence with Lord Kerry at Bowood had initially been with the potential of a remote interview or site visit, but participation ultimately took the form of a written questionnaire in respect of the owner's preference.

Burton Constable Hall

Burton Constable Hall is an Elizabethan manor house located nine miles northeast of Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire (TA 18871 36784). The house is situated within 330 acres of parkland designed by Capability Brown (Historic England 1984; Burton Constable 2024a). The oldest part of the house, a central tower, dates to the twelfth century, however the current house dates



Figure 17. Burton Constable Hall, east front (author's photo)

largely to the late sixteenth century with a number of eighteenth-century alterations (Burton Constable 2024b). Still home to the Constable family who own the wider agricultural estate, the house and parkland are owned and managed

independently by the Burton Constable Foundation, a charity established in 1992 with an endowment from the National Heritage Memorial Fund to oversee the hall and grounds for public benefit (Hall 1994, 1). The parkland has been subject to an extensive programme of restoration since 1999 to restore the original Brownian park, using a substantial number of archival documents to accurately reconstruct the original eighteenth-century design. Funded by Natural England's Countryside Stewardship Scheme, this project has involved planting thousands of trees, the restoration of hedges, sunk fences and other built features. The park is grazed by heritage-breed cattle and sheep and the pasture is managed without the use of artificial fertilisers to maintain a healthy and biologically diverse environment (Burton Constable 2021a). The Burton Constable Foundation makes a point to promote its park and walking trails as critical spaces for the promotion of mental and physical health, with the aim that a growing number of people across Hull and East Yorkshire will use the wider estate as a space to improve their health and engage with the natural environment. In their words, they hope to be the area's 'number one destination...for outdoor activities and attractions – especially in terms of a place where you can feel safe and look to improve your well-being' (Peart 2020).

Research at Burton Constable consisted of a joint interview with Susan Hopkinson, Director of the Burton Constable Hall Foundation and Grounds and Parkland Officer, Dave Nassau. This group discussion was followed by a parkland tour with Nassau.

Harewood House

Harewood House is a Palladian mansion nine miles north of Leeds in West Yorkshire (SE 31018 41792). Another of England's 'Treasure Houses', it has been home to the Lascelles family since it was completed in 1771. The current house was built by Edwin Lascelles on the site of a previously existing medieval manor, Gawthorpe Hall. This new mansion, built in a contemporary and



Figure 18. Harewood House, south front and parterre (author's photo)

fashionable Palladian style, was funded through considerable familial wealth gained through the West Indian sugar trade; Edwin himself was born in Barbados (Finch 2020, 75-76). To

complement his new neoclassical country house, Lascelles hired Capability Brown to design a new parkland environment in the naturalistic style. Between 1772 and 1780, Brown and his team carried out extensive landscaping works around the house, including the demolition of Gawthorpe Hall and the creation of the large lake south of the house (Finch 2020, 85-87)

Since 1986, 140 of the 1,000 acres of historic parkland, along with the house, ancillary buildings, formal gardens, and arboreta which comprise the core visitor experience has fallen under the remit of the Harewood House Trust whose aim is to preserve the site for public benefit (Harewood n.d.a; Harewood n.d.b). The rest of the 4,000-acre estate is still held privately by the Lascelles family and operates as a separate enterprise but with very close links and overlapping interests in environmental sustainability. In 2019 the Trust developed a master plan designed to work towards financial sustainability, largely centred around audience development, growth and income generation to further support its mission of conservation, education and recreation. Core to that master plan is a landscape strategy which aims to develop areas of its historic parkland and has involved the closure of their longstanding exotic bird garden in 2023 (Harewood 2023). News of this closure and Harewood House Trust's intention to replace it with habitats which support native wildlife drew the researcher to enquire further about this landscape strategy. This project will take place over ten years and involves constructing footpaths to connect historic estate walks, capitalising on mature trees present by developing a woodland garden and remodelling their children's play area. In addition to audience development and income generation, this landscape project aims to improve the park's environmental health while bolstering recreational offerings for physical and mental wellbeing (Knight 2023).

Communications with Harewood benefitted from the Treasure Houses network gained through working with Holkham Hall. Research at Harewood involved a remote interview with Kath Knight, who at the time of research had recently come on board as Deputy Chief Executive of the Harewood House Trust. A follow-up interview with Ben Lascelles, the Managing Director of Harewood Estate was discussed, but were not realised.

Hatfield House

Hatfield House is a large Jacobean prodigy house located in Hertfordshire, fourteen miles southeast of Luton (TL 23715 08394). It sits adjacent to the late fifteenth-century Hatfield



Palace (now called Hatfield Old House) which was acquired by Henry VIII following the Dissolution who kept it as the primary residence for his children (Historic England 1987c).

Figure 19. Hatfield House and West formal garden (Hatfield House 2026)

It was at Hatfield

Old House where Elizabeth I received news of her accession to the throne in 1558. (Hatfield Park 2026a). Another of England's Treasure Houses, the current Hatfield House was built between 1607 and 1612 by Robert Cecil, the 1st Earl of Salisbury on acquiring the property from James I and has remained in the family since its construction. Today it is the home of Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, 7th Marquess of Salisbury and the family seat of the Cecil family, whose properties also include the seventeenth-century Cranborne manor and estate in Dorset which has implemented similar sustainability strategies (Gascoyne 2025). Hatfield House and its seventeenth-century formal gardens sit within the roughly 800-acre Hatfield Park. In addition to its surrounding parkland, the wider estate is made up of about 7,000 acres split between arable farming and woodlands (Mitchell 2023, 581-582). Hatfield's royal connections, an extensive legal archive from the Tudor and Elizabethan age, and the history of the Marquesses of Salisbury as a major political dynasty have figured prominently in the estate's identity and heritage appeal (Mitchell 2023, 587). As with Holkham, Hatfield has increasingly dedicated itself to delivering environmental outcomes both in its listed parkland and across its wider arable estate including changes to parkland management policies that reduce non-essential tidying and a substantial regenerative agriculture programme (Hatfield Park 2026).

Hatfield was selected for study through online media documenting their environmental management schemes, however networking through the Treasure Houses group provided the requisite contacts for undertaking research on the estate. Research on Hatfield involved a remote interview with Peter Mitchell who works as the Head of Sustainability for Hatfield's managing body Gascoyne Estates Limited, which also oversees the Cranborne estate in Dorset and property in London.

Mapperton House



Figure 20. Mapperton House (author's photo)

Mapperton House is a Jacobean manor house, located in a remote area of southern Dorset, forty-five miles east of Exeter (SY 50353 99673), belonging to the 12th Earl and Countess of Sandwich. While the oldest parts of the house date to the 1540s, substantial portions of it are a product of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century alterations made by the Brodrepp family who purchased the estate in 1609. The estate passed through the Bodrepp family until it was incorporated into the Compton estates through marriage in 1788. In 1919, the Compton family auctioned off the estate to a Mrs Ethel DM Labouchere, who restored the house and oversaw construction of an Arts and Crafts style formal garden adjacent to the house (Historic England 2013). After her death it was purchased by Victor Montagu, later the 10th Earl of Sandwich, in 1955 and remains in the family. Since 2016, Mapperton has been managed by Luke Montagu, formerly Viscount Hinchinbrooke, and since 2025 the 12th Earl, along with his wife, Julie. Their mission statement, 'wellbeing through connection with heritage, nature and community' is reflected in the way they manage their 1,900-acre estate (Mapperton 2024;

Historic England 2013; 1951). The estate contains less than fifty acres of manicured, historic parkland immediately adjacent to the house (Kingston 2025, 750), however, they are currently working on a large-scale landscape recovery project involving the return of 1,000 acres of land to nature through a multi-staged rewilding process. In addition to this project, they have also been transitioning their tenanted, 300-acre Marsh Farm to a regenerative farming system which has seen a move towards low or zero input field and crop management, the integration of multispecies herbal leys and changes to grazing practices (Mapperton Wildlands 2025). Video call interviews were undertaken with Tom Gregory, tenant farmer of Marsh Farm and Mapperton's Estate Manager, Claire Kingston.

Further Sites and Considerations

This research has largely depended upon contacting sites or individuals online through general enquiry portals or email contact information. With a methodology that required negotiating and scheduling interviews, a number of estates were ultimately not assessed, but remain thematically relevant. The following sites were approached for research, but contact was not sustained or research did not come to fruition. They are presented here to serve as further evidence of the landscape focused operations which have taken place among England's estates.



Figure 21. Pigs introduced as part of a programme of species introduction at Doddington's rewilded landscape. The breed, Mangalitzta, is a heritage breed indigenous to Hungary, similar to the extinct Lincolnshire Curly Coat (Wilder Doddington 2023)

Leighton Hall Estate in Lancashire contains roughly 1,650 acres of mixed deciduous woodland and grazed farmland, featuring conservation strategies that have included large-scale tree planting schemes and species conservation projects like red squirrel re-introduction (Leighton

Hall n.d.). The Trelowarren Estate in Cornwall has been home to the Vyvyan family since the fifteenth century and has recently dedicated itself to being one of England's premier 'eco-estates'. The current owners have implemented carbon neutral strategies in addition to nature-based farming initiatives and habitat creation projects (Trelowarren 2025). While Trelowarren has limited visitor-facing engagements outside of their leisure business, they manage a network of permissive paths on the grounds free to the public during spring and summer months. Doddington Hall, an Elizabethan prodigy house in Lincolnshire has been in the midst of a rewilding project they have named, 'Wilder Doddington' since 2021. This 720-hectare project has involved creating a 'haven for nature' out of previously intensively farmed arable land and overgrazed grassland, including the introduction of wild ponies and pigs (Rewilding Britain 2025a; Doddington 2024). In Shropshire, Dudmaston Hall, a National Trust-owned property in which the family still resides, has integrated a number of nature-based initiatives on its 3,000-acre estate, including 240 acres of farmland to heathland habitat creation, the implementation of conservation grazing and a commercial forestry to woodland habitat creation project (National Trust 2024b; National Trust 2024c). Ormseby Hall, an eighteenth-century mansion with 240 acres of associated parkland and farmland, began a landscape restoration project in 2021 which sought to 'create a green oasis and nature-rich haven in the heart of urban Middlesbrough' (National Trust 2021b). As with Osterley Park, research interest in Ormesby Hall stemmed from its location within a high-density urban environment and its value as a historic space with a focus on connecting people to nature for health and wellbeing. An outlier among the other sites in terms of ownership, Temple Newsam is owned and managed by Leeds City Council as part of their Leeds Museums & Galleries service. A substantial Tudor-Jacobean house with some 1,500 acres of surrounding Brownian parkland, Temple Newsam has established itself as a vital municipal park for the city of Leeds, with an array of recreational and wellbeing-focused offerings. Moreover, its Home Farm is one of the largest rare-breed centres in Europe and promotes a contemporary nature conservation approach which integrates farming and heritage (Temple Newsam 2024).

The sites contained in this sample are characterised by a diversity of location, size, commercial focus, and ownership structure which are reflective of a substantial number of estates in lowland England. Furthermore, the interview participants work in a variety of positions within these estate contexts, including farming, ecological conservation and sustainability, landscape and garden management, visitor operations, and estate management. As a result, this data reflects a useful variety of backgrounds, experiences, and estate contexts representative of

much of the country house and estate industry as a whole. Therefore, through their original contributions, this research provides insight into changing management priorities and estate directives which can be extrapolated out across the sector. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the scope and limitations of this purposive sampling bias. By choosing sites which have undertaken the environmental and social landscape-centred changes discussed above, the estates which have yet to do so are not directly represented. Moreover, as the research is limited to lowland estates in England, the data does not represent those in the other devolved nations or the cultural, economic, and ecological environments of those in upland settings. However, the sites and stakeholders which participated in this research provide an opportunity to critically assess developing changes in similar estate contexts in lowland England. Thus, having provided an overview of how this research was refined and a representative sample was achieved, this thesis will now turn to the developments in landscape which are taking place across these estates and the implications for their role and significance in contemporary England.

Chapter 4. Sustainable Estates

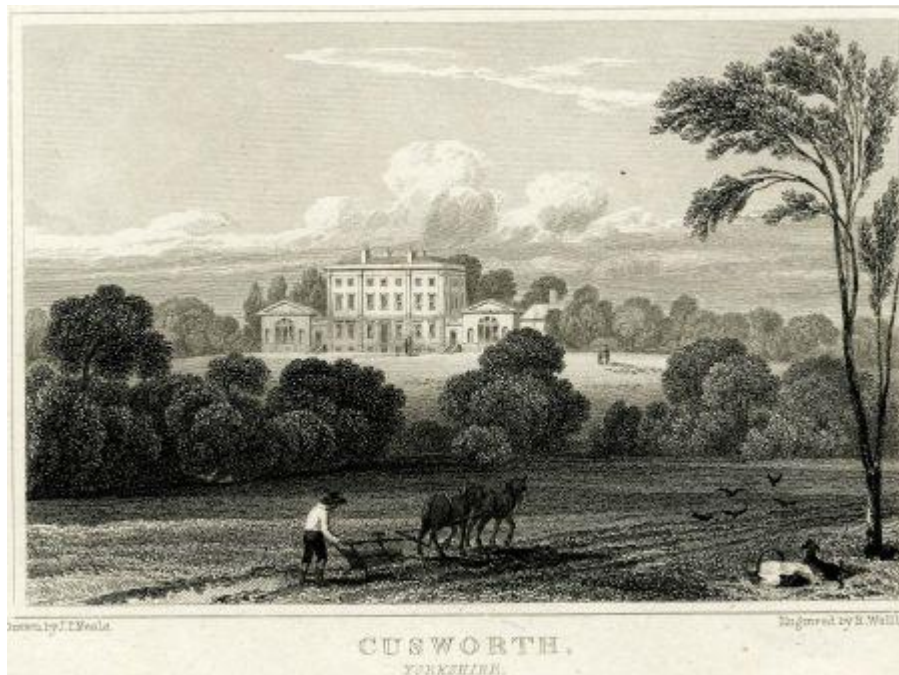


Figure 22. Engraving of Cusworth Hall near Doncaster from John Neale's *Views of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen, in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland* (Neale 1822). Built between 1740 and 1744 for William Wrightson Esq. its Classical architecture was complemented by gardens designed in the new landscape style visible adjacent to the house. The horse and ploughman team in the foreground speak to the wider estate as a modern and productive agricultural landscape (Historic England 1990).

'Those who enjoy a country residence have an opportunity of adding to the charms of rural scenery, the pleasures resulting from agriculture and gardening...'

John Claudius Loudon, *A Treatise on Forming, Improving, and Managing Country Residences* (Loudon 1806, 4)

The Historic Estate: Polite and Productive Landscapes

Landscape designer John Claudius Loudon's advice that it suits the country gentleman to engage himself in matters of farm and garden reflects the duality of the historic landscapes of the landed elite, valued for both their agricultural production and as the setting for polite leisure. The estates of the landowners for which he wrote his treatises on architectural and garden design were the result of sweeping changes in the organisation and socio-political roles of these rural spaces during the preceding post-medieval centuries. The disintegration of traditional feudal structures from the mid-fourteenth century and the landscape upheaval resulting from the Dissolution of the Monasteries enabled a substantial transfer of wealth and a reconceptualisation of property rights which favoured the concentration of land away from the common to the private through processes of enclosure, along with the commercialisation of land within an increasingly market-orientated economy (Heldring *et al.* 2021; Finch & Dyrmann

2019, 14; Williamson 1995, 8). This consolidation of land, and therefore wealth and power, into the hands of a smaller group of engrossing landowners over the following centuries coalesced around the development of the 'modern' English estate during the eighteenth century.

Acknowledging deviations from the archetype, these rural, landed properties can be read through a shared grammar of landscape in which the mansion house and gardens are surrounded by a park landscape and 'home farm' which form the estate's ornamental and productive core. Outside this boundary lay the tenanted farms, fields, forests and settlements which made up the wider estate (Finch & Dyrmann 2019, 25; Williamson 2007, 1-2). Far from being disparate and unrelated elements, they were perceived and functioned holistically, even if the sweeping lawns and carefully placed tree clumps distanced the central house from the rural labours which supported them (Finch 2007, 19-21; Williamson & Bellamy 1987, 116-117).

Moreover, these corresponding landscapes were critical to maintaining the cultural trappings and social practices of polite society through their 'improvement' and the pursuit of agricultural productivity (Williamson 2002, 79-80; 1995, 110-118; Wilmot 1990, 40). This functional and ideological dualism of these country settings is reflected in Thomas Gainsborough's (1727-1788) *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (Figure 23). Painted around 1750, it was commissioned to celebrate

the wedding of Robert and Francis (née Carter) Andrews. Famous for its depiction of eighteenth-century genteel ideals, the newlyweds sit within the landscape of



Figure 23. *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (Gainsborough, about 1750)

their 3,000-acre estate, The Auberies, on the edge of Sudbury, Suffolk. Mr Andrews is presented as both a sporting man of 'elegant leisure' and a modern agriculturalist, evidenced by his use of the seed drill illustrated by the linear rows in which the grain had been planted (Bermingham 1987, 29). In the distance, a flock of sheep within an enclosed field speak to the privatisation of land from which the couple have benefitted as members of the landed class; labourers are noticeably absent from the painting. They are depicted not simply as newlyweds, but as

landowners, their wealth and privilege inalienable within Gainsborough's representation of them in a landscape vital to a polite and productive society (Vaughan 2002, 56-57; Bermingham 1987, 28-30).

Though these two components of the English landed estate, the designed parkland and surrounding farmland should be understood as historically and ecologically interconnected, though their form and management regimes differ. Consequently, they are presented distinctly in this chapter to explore the respective environmental strategies which are being integrated into their management systems. However, as the following will uncover, these changes are driven by an interrelated shift in culture and landscape philosophy which is transforming these landscapes and calls for the reinterpretation of their significance in estate contexts.

4.1 Estate Parkland: Ornament and Ecology



Figure 24. 'Burton Constable Seen from the Lake' by George Barret the Elder (Barret 1777), showing Burton Constable Hall during Capability Brown's redevelopment of the formal gardens into a naturalistic parkland setting. As part of the work he carried out between 1772 and 1782, Brown merged two existing ponds into one larger lake. The bridge was constructed to create a new, winding approach to the house (Burton Constable).

'It is the peculiar happiness of this age to see...regularity banished, prospects opened, the country called in, nature rescued and improved and art decently concealing herself under her own perfections.'

Adam Fitz-Adam, *The World* (1776, 76)

The Landscape Park

The designed landscape parks across the United Kingdom were a core element of historic estates. They are a defining feature of the nation's rural character and cultural heritage and have often been deemed one of, if not *the* nation's greatest contributions to global art and culture (Historic England 2017, 10; Richardson 2007; Robinson 1988; Hadfield 1977; Clark 1948). The history, design and socio-political and economic contexts of these landscapes have been thoroughly examined elsewhere (Floud 2019; Richardson 2007; Williamson 1998; Hunt & Willis 1988), but a brief overview of their development and defining characteristics will be undertaken to situate them within a broader history of landscape design and to demonstrate how they created critical wildlife habitats across modern Britain.

The landscape park, popularised by a succession of designers in the mid and late eighteenth century, embodies an idealised view of nature in which an uninterrupted vista of grazed pasture

extends out from the central house, dotted with scattered trees or tree clumps, stretches of woodland, and serpentine lakes. This parkland is typically enclosed by a perimeter belt of trees, frequently encircled by a boundary wall or railing (Historic England 2017, 10). Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) was the most famous architect of this 'landscape style', though he was certainly not the first nor last (Turner 1999, 7-8). Much has been written about Brown, his stylistic predecessors and followers, from William Kent (1685-1748) to Humphry Repton (1752-1818), the specifics of which lay outside this particular research (Phibbs 2016; Finch & Woudstra 2020; Williamson 2020; Daniels 1999; Wilson 1984; Hyams 1971; Stroud 1962). What is of primary value to this research is the rejection of the geometric planting which preceded this new naturalistic style and the lasting effect that stylistic revolution had on ornamental landscape design and its relevance to contemporary environmental concerns. Over the course of the eighteenth century, straight lines were superseded by the contoured, irregular, and organically curvilinear (Jackson-Stops 1992, 14; Hadfield 1967, 105). Williamson (1998b) discusses some of the proposed motivations behind this aesthetic change, highlighting the perspective that as the English wilderness had been lost, an interest in more natural landscapes became signals of wealth and taste. He acknowledges that 'natural' in this sense should be interpreted as a reduced visibility of human intervention, particularly compared to their highly manicured geometric predecessors, rather than being devoid of any human activity. Intended for purposes of both pleasure and productivity, these naturalistic designed landscapes feature more habitat diversity than the formal gardens before them, containing a mix of wood-pasture, grassland, woodland and water features (Pearman 2016, 6). Deeply embedded in the intellectual and artistic ideologies of the Enlightenment, these designed landscapes were heavily influenced by both the classical world, visual culture, gardens, and landscapes of contemporary Italy (Hunt 1992, 3-18; 1989, 333). The landscapes of Renaissance paintings, architecture, and sculpture seen while on their Grand Tour inspired landowners and tastemakers to recreate them as tableaux in the English countryside (Manca 2015; Brook 2008; Turner 1999, 29-30). Yet within the contexts of their own historical geographies, these new parklands also reflected a return to the landscape character of medieval parks which had themselves undergone the imposition of symmetry and straightness during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Lasdun 1991, 77). Indeed, not only were landscape parks inspired in part by the wood-pasture landscapes of medieval parkland, many incorporated or modified existing deer parks and often retained historic trees which are now of critical ecological value (Rackham 2004, 5; Williamson 1998, 94-95). As a result of this shift in landscape style, even today, contemporary country estates contain roughly half of England's wood-pasture habitats

(Henry 2021, 5), a fact which has since yielded increasing interest in these spaces for their environmental value rather than their historical and cultural significance alone.

Historic Parkland: An Environmental Asset

Historic parkland, like the great houses they belong to, have been subject to enquiry and investigation by historians, archaeologists, and landscape architects. However, in more recent years, they have received increased attention from ecologists due to their value as critically important mosaic habitats which are increasingly scarce in the agricultural landscape. They support a number of floral, faunal, fungal and invertebrate populations that contribute to healthy natural environments and high levels of biodiversity (JNCC 2011). The ecological value of these historic designed landscapes lies in their patchwork of multi species-supporting habitats and is designated as ‘wood-pasture and parkland’ by the UK government and environmental NGOs. Recognised by Natural England in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, wood-pasture and parkland is listed as a ‘Priority Habitat’, meaning it has been ‘deemed of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity’ and is subject to maintenance and restoration through agri-environment schemes (Natural England, 2022). Rather than referring to a specific plant community, wood-pasture and parkland represents a vegetation structure and is typically a product of historic land management. It can be defined as a landscape of ‘large, open-grown or high forest trees (often pollards), which may be hundreds of years old, at various densities, in a matrix of grazed grassland, heathland and/or woodland floras. Grazing animals are fundamental to the existence of this habitat’ (Perry 2015, 2). Within this habitat matrix however, mature, veteran, and ancient trees are the most critical components of historic wood-pasture and parkland’s ecological significance, and this is reflected in government guidance. As of 2025, the UK government provides funding grants for the environmental conservation of wood-pasture and parkland for which its primary action aims are to support ‘mature and veteran trees’, ‘undisturbed standing, attached and fallen dead wood’ and ‘designed landscape and parkland features’ (Defra 2025a). The ecological importance of these aged trees and their associated dead and decaying wood lies in their habitat value to saproxylic insects³ which are crucial to healthy and sustainable ecosystems (Hardersen & Zapponi 2018). Nevertheless, in Natural England’s definition of wood-pasture and parkland provided by Perry (2015), these vital arboreal habitats are supported by a floor of grassland and other flora which are maintained through the presence of grazing animals. However, as will be shown later, in parkland settings these areas of grass, sward, and scrub have been subject in recent decades to artificial and

³ ‘Saproxylic species depend on dead and decaying wood for at least part of their lifecycle’ and comprise roughly ‘20% of the entire British fauna’ (NatureScot 2019).

environmentally problematic means of maintenance through mowing and clearing. Again, the importance of these grassland areas lies in their habitat value to saproxylic insects and other animal species within the ecosystem matrix (PTES 2025a; 2025b).

This appreciation for the environmental value of wood-pasture and parkland landscapes stems in large part from a revised understanding of the landscape characteristics of prehistoric Europe. When Frans Vera published *Grazing Ecology and Forest History* in 2000, he proposed that in contrast to previous assertions that the prehistoric lowlands of Western and Central Europe were dominated by deciduous forests, the original vegetation of these regions was in fact a ‘park-like landscape’ where the growth of trees and shrubs were determined by large grazing mammals (Vera 2000, 376). His theory, often referred to as the ‘Vera hypothesis’ or ‘wood-pasture hypothesis’, has come to form the basis of much of the contemporary rewilding movement in the UK and across Europe more broadly (Locquet & Carver 2022). Places such as the Knepp Estate in West Sussex have put this theory into practice and made headlines for reverting large swathes of low-value farmland to minimally managed ‘wildlands’ that imitate these prehistoric landscapes (Tree 2018). Referred to as ‘rewilding’, the term has become something of a catch-all for a growing trend being delivered at various degrees of scale and will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. This process of habitat creation is one piece of the larger environmental puzzle, another being how these vital wood-pasture and parkland landscapes are being managed differently to better support environmental health and confront issues of anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss. Existing designed parklands have been conserved for their heritage significance since the establishment of Historic England’s ‘Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England’ in 1984 (Historic England 2025). In light of the aforementioned ecological value recognised in these designed landscapes, these wood-pasture and parkland habitats are now maintained both for their cultural and historic as well as ecosystem significance (Defra 2025a; JNCC 2011). However, these turns towards ecologically-driven parkland maintenance have created a dichotomy in these landscapes centred around the visual experience, aesthetics, and purpose of historic designed parkland. The focal point of this contrast is the rejection of a manicured or ‘tidy’ manner of parkland landscape presentation which became standard in the twentieth century during the period in which the country house and its grounds became preserved as heritage objects.

Ecological Parkland: Rallying Against Tidy-mindedness

While discussing the practice of environmentally-friendly management of historic parkland, Jon Lewney, Countryside Manager at Calke Abbey, commented that tidiness is ‘what we’re rallying

against' (Lewney, 2024, 470). Oliver Rackham (2004, 13) made similar remarks, stating that 'tidy-mindedness' has been an enemy to the ancient trees and woods of landscape parks, felled for their unappealing appearance particularly during the twentieth century. In Suffolk, he noted the loss of ancient hawthorn trees at Heveningham Hall, of nearly half the free-standing trees at Ickworth present on the OS map of 1882-3 and the burning of 'dying' or 'unsightly' trees at Hatfield Forest in Essex. The removal of these 'unsightly' trees along with other pieces of dead or decaying wood in parkland has been fundamental to 'tidying up', but it can also extend to the over-maintenance of grass and scrub through mowing and trimming (English Heritage 2011). Rackham (1990, 201) argued that 'tidy-mindedness can perhaps be overcome with education' and observed that as of the late 1980s the situation seemed to be looking brighter. Outlined above, 'wood-pasture and parkland' is a habitat which consists of trees of varying densities in a habitat matrix of grassland and woodland flora. As grazed landscapes, there has been an agricultural deintensification within these settings to mitigate environmental damage from overgrazing by reducing stocking densities, but ecologically-motivated revisions to parkland management systems have been primarily defined by a wholesale reduction in the tidying and manicuring of parkland landscapes. As the following section will reveal, this has been achieved by abandoning or modifying practices of dead wood clearance or the removal of 'unsightly' trees which directly harms critical species-supporting habitats. It has likewise been pursued by reducing or eliminating any mowing, trimming, or clearing of rough areas of grassland and scrub which had been undertaken for the express purpose of a manicured presentation. One of the first instances of a large-scale experimentation with 'untidy' parkland maintenance and the ecological value it holds was undertaken when the National Trust took ownership of Calke Abbey and is presented in this work as a primary example of wood-pasture and parkland management that challenges historic forms of maintenance for the benefit of the natural environment.

Calke Abbey

As shown earlier in Chapter 3, the National Trust's interest in Calke Abbey and its parkland stemmed from its conditions of neglect and semi-abandonment which presented opportunities for a unique approach to the management and presentation of a stately home and its wider landscape. The situation the Trust entered into was the product of a tumultuous century in the estate's history. When Sir Vauncey Crewe, highly reclusive and obsessed with sport, succeeded his father in 1886, he had little interest in farming and less in entertaining. During his time, he let the park run relatively wild and was primarily interested in using it as a game preserve. Consequently, Calke's landscape went from tidy and well-ordered to looking like a 'garden

where the gardener had departed' (Cox 1989, 79). Following his death in 1924, the estate suffered financial difficulties and inheritance issues and retained a relatively small staff, prioritising maintenance of the house and stable blocks. While the post-war era witnessed an intensification of agriculture within the parkland, much of it developed and retained a wild character, particularly areas less likely to be seen by visitors (Cox 1989, 41, 86-88; Jenkins & Drury 1988, 494). All National Trust properties have an internal 'spirit of place', a guiding mantra which directs how the site is managed and is informed both by what makes the site unique and what it means to its wider community (Ghosh 2016). Calke Abbey's is 'the un-stately stately home' which as shown in Chapter 3 has created a house tour more akin to a cabinet of curiosities than a country house museum, with the former family's extensive collection of ecological and geological specimens on display inside a domestic interior kept in a state of preserved decay. Calke's Countryside Manager, Jon Lewney, noted that this spirit of place 'echoes out into the park' through its rough and untidy presentation (Lewney 2024, 464). Moreover, with natural history collections on display in the house, many of which are local, and an ecological focus in the wider parkland, Calke Abbey features a unique method of interpretation among country houses which has strong linkages between the historic house and its environmental context.

Calke Park itself, which encompasses the early modern deer park of the Calke Abbey estate, has been a registered Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) since 1992 and a National Nature Reserve (NNR) since 2004 (Alexander & Abrahams 2006, 11). SSSIs are a formal conservation designation given to local habitats which are of particular interest for rare floral or faunal species, geological, or physiological features (Cottam 2019), while NNRs are a more selective, higher level designation, defined as nationally important habitats involving greater management interventions by national government bodies. In England, over 99% of all NNRs are also registered as SSSIs (HL Deb 12 November 2018) These designations are in recognition of its valuable wood-pasture and its rich floral and faunal biodiversity. Stated earlier, the cornerstone of wood-pasture and parkland ecology is the habitat value of the dead and decaying wood in veteran trees. The jewels in Calke Park's ecological crown are hundreds of veteran trees, with thousands more unlisted trees with veteran characteristics such as hollowing, canopy dead wood or other elements of decay (Lewney 2024, 490; Woodland Trust 2008, 5). Calke Park's most famous example, and a specific draw for visitors, is the Old Man of Calke (Figure 25). Gnarled, irregular and split, the ancient oak is estimated at between 1,000 and 1,200 years old and is an excellent example of the ecological value of dead and decaying wood habitats present in ancient and veteran trees with its retrenched (widened) and hollowed trunk. While trees such



Figure 25. *The Old Man of Calke* (author's photo)

as these are fantastic assets on their own, Calke Park is special amongst historic parklands for the sheer volume of these critical dead wood habitats across the park. Of the 115,000

recorded veteran trees across all of England, over 650 (0.6%) of those are at Calke (National Trust n.d.e; Nottingham 2022). In addition to the Trust's efforts at preserving ancient and veteran trees, fallen dead wood assemblages are kept in situ and are named as a feature of touristic interest at Calke on the National Trust's website (National Trust n.d.e). Along with the preservation of Calke's veteran trees and associated dead wood habitats, the Trust has implemented other revisions to parkland management over the years regarding the grassland and woodland flora which have enhanced the biodiversity and sustainability of its wood-pasture landscape. What follows is an investigation into how the Trust has used Calke Abbey as a successful case study in ecologically-driven management systems which challenge the tidy and manicured forms of landscape presentation that dominated during much of the twentieth century. While they are inextricably linked in wood-pasture ecologies, management approaches to trees and grasslands are distinct and presented independently here. Within each thematic section, recent management histories and current practices at Calke Abbey are explored first, followed by corroborating and supporting evidence from other sites consulted for this work.

Trees and Dead wood

Calke Abbey's parkland was significantly rougher and less manicured relative to other estates following Sir Vauncey Crewe's death in 1924. Nevertheless, before the National Trust took ownership of Calke there were efforts to maintain a sharp standard of presentation, albeit limited as a result of the estate's minimal staff. Consequently, the tidying up of dead and decaying wood was restricted to the areas of the park leading up to the house on either side of the drive with less visible areas being largely left to natural processes (Cove 2024 a). In contrast to the tidying undertaken in areas of Calke Park under private ownership, after the takeover from the National Trust in 1985, and increasingly so since then, the individual bits or large

assemblages of dead wood have been left. Bill Cove, Calke's former Countryside Manager who worked on the estate both before and after the Trust assumed ownership, shed light on how the charity revised their approach to tidying up dead wood.

Cove: '...what we did at Calke in terms of leaving all the timber lying there, and anything that wasn't on a footpath, we started leaving it, well [some] was left anyway, but [under the Trust's ownership] we expanded the areas that that happened in' (Cove 2024a, 502).



Figure 26. *Dead wood assemblage along main drive (author's photo)*

Particularly during the early years of the Trust's ownership, this practice was met with complaints among the newly visiting public. According to Cove, the Trust received regular criticism regarding tidiness when they

opened Calke, asserting that Calke's 'un-stateliness' was not in keeping with what a country house visit should be. Comparisons to traditional and more manicured standards of presentation at nearby sites were common: 'humph, you ought to go to Kedleston and get tidied up a bit like Kedleston does' (Cove 2024a, 514). However, the work at Calke served to influence other properties to pursue similar reductions in aesthetic tidying:

Cove: 'Places like Kedleston...had a totally opposite approach in that anything that dropped on the floor had to be burnt or moved to one side out the way...moved out of the parkland. ...it was a total opposite. And eventually, we [Calke Abbey] were being held up as this is what the Trust should be doing. ...And gradually, other properties including Kedleston, started...relaxing their tidying policies with a lot of pressure from somewhere like Kedleston that's got a sit-in family member in the house. And they were very unhappy about that situation, because they were used to the original side of things. But Calke, at Calke it wasn't an issue, because our direct descendants for the house had sort of gone' (Cove 2024a, 502).

Visitors to Calke Abbey are met with large collections of fallen timber and dead wood (Figure 26) within metres of the historic drive that leads from Ticknall village. While complaints by the visiting public about presentation are reportedly less common these days, Calke Park's appearance does occasionally raise doubts even among staff (Lewney 2024, 466). A recently damaged tree (Figure 27) makes an interesting example from a management perspective as even Countryside Manager, Jon Lewney acknowledged the need to occasionally confront his own internalised expectations of presentability:



Figure 27. (author's photo)

Lewney: 'As you go around Hogg's Close Corner...there's an old [tree], I think it's a black pine. Anyway, there's an old pine tree that had cracked out in one of the storms. And they've [the arborist team] ...not cut it, they've not even severed it from the root, really, they've just cut it and let it lay over. And even for me, I was like, wow, that looks a bit of a mess. You know, from a presentation point of view...I'd have preferred it to [have] been severed and left than still attached [but] somehow in my head, I've got to square that my want for it to be aesthetically pleasing is not that important really in the grand scheme of things. It's not as important as the associated wildlife that might be using that tree. I think...my team and me...you know, to hear there's an exceptional amount of dead wood, well we're proud of that, that's a nice thing to hear' (Lewney 2024, 466).

Instances where damaged or decaying trees or limbs are moved by the arborist team are limited to situations in which they pose a threat to human safety or could potentially damage existing structures. Another recently storm-damaged tree (Figure 28) is one such example and will be severed and removed to prevent damage to the ha-ha wall it is situated above (Lewney 2024, 493).



Figure 28. (author's photo)

The southern approach from Ticknall village is along a lime tree avenue that leads to the house and the tolerance for nature's untidiness is clear as the trees themselves are thick with epicormic growth (Figure 29), offshoots from the trunk or branches as a result of environmental stress. Moreover, the sticks, cast-offs and windthrow from those trees and their accompanying shoots are left to decay where they fall (Figure 30). This is at odds with what guests of the Harper-Crewes would have seen as well as the visiting public during the first decade or so after the Trust took ownership of the estate in 1985. Photographs (Figures 31, 32) from previous decades are visual evidence of how changes, not only in tidying procedures but to livestock densities, carry a knock-on effect for the aesthetic appearance of the park. Rather than being pruned, the absence of epicormic growth in these earlier photographs was a result of intensive grazing. When Bill Cove began his tenure at Calke under the Harpur-Crewes in 1972 until he took over as Countryside Manager in 1997, the estate was engaged in high levels of intensive pastoral farming and contained the highest levels of livestock in the National Trust with 400-500 sheep and about 150 cattle (Cove 2024a, 503-504). As a result, year-round intensive grazing was common practice and young offshoots were consumed by livestock, particularly cattle, discouraging woody growth and subsequently limiting the amount of dead wood present along the avenue.



Figure 30. Lime tree avenue (author's photo)



Figure 29. Lime tree avenue (author's photo)

Graham: 'I found some photos actually, from 1995...it looks like that drive was more maintained, more tidied, it actually even looked like some of the epicormic growth had been removed or trimmed. Do you know about...how that was approached?'

Cove: '...we always had a policy of winter damage, and twigs and branches around the trees were always cleared up like now, February, March time. Just go along with a [inaudible] and a bucket, fill everything up and tip it all out of the way. So we'd have that one visit a year just to tidy the winter rubbish out. Now in terms of the epicormic growth, no, that's never been trimmed. But what we used to have was constant cattle in the park. So a lot of cattle grazing and probably more intensive cattle grazing than there is now definitely. So a lot of the lower branches through summer would have been completely browsed off. Now we still have summer grazing but it's...it's only from sort of May through till the end of October, when there's lots of other vegetation, so it's not a problem. So...it's nowhere near as intensively grazed. So therefore, that epicormic

[growth]...the lowdown stuff has got growing and drooped and you know, is now obviously a bit more woody, so not quite as palatable' (Cove 2024a, 502-503).



Figure 31. Lime tree avenue, 1960s (Bourne c. 1960)



Figure 32. Lime tree avenue, 1995 (Ockenden 1995)

Despite the Trust's intention to reduce livestock densities to create healthier pasture, they were met with resistance from Norman Clarke, Calke's Farm Manager and Head Warden from 1958 to 1997. When Katherine Hearn, conservationist at the National Trust approached Norman about opportunities to promote beetle populations, he replied, 'this park grows beef m'lady, not bloody beetles' (Cove 2024a, 501). In later years after Clarke's retirement the amount of stock was reduced, with the farmed-in-hand commercial herd of sheep removed in 2004 and the cattle restricted to a smaller, tenanted herd of about forty which grazed the park solely in the summer months (Cove 2024a, 503). When Cove was interviewed for Clarke's replacement position in 1997, it was made clear that the intensively farmed and managed parkland would undergo substantial change:

Cove: '...when Mark Twiddle who was the regional director who interviewed me said, "look that's not how it's going to be." So there was quite a lot of changes when I came. Cutting down on mowing for tidiness, cutting down on the amount we did on various things like that' (Cove 2024a, 501)

Norman's retort was consistent with post-war mindsets and agricultural policies that approached farming through a purely productivist lens and valued intensive farming for its high yields irrespective of its environmental cost. (Penlington 2023, 638; Grant 2005, 7). In contrast, contemporary government policy, to be discussed more fully later, rewards ecological benefits rather than productive output or scale of landownership and is consequently influencing land management and agricultural practices (Lewney 2024; Great Britain. Defra, 2018).

As the 'un-stately stately home', Calke's natural assets and those who oversee them have benefitted from the relative freedom to let nature take its course, the accumulations of dead wood being one of the primary ways in which the Trust has allowed for the greater integration of natural processes within historic parkland. Across other Trust houses, there have previously been limitations on these allowances which have varied from site to site depending on a house's particular 'spirit of place' and the manner of presentation the Trust has historically been interested in. For example, in contrast to Calke Abbey which has now retained these dead wood assemblages for decades, Hardwick Hall, which sits some forty miles north in Derbyshire, has held a stricter policy on in situ dead wood in keeping with the curatorial spirit of the house and wider estate which has focused on telling the story of Bess of Hardwick. Jon Lewney, who worked previously as an area ranger at Hardwick Hall between 2011 and 2016 noted the contrast between management systems at Calke and Hardwick during his time at the latter property:

Graham: ‘...in terms of managing the historic parkland... what sort of things do you have to do to maintain the...aesthetic quality of it...within the limitations of trying to manage it ecologically?’

Lewney: ‘It’s really interesting...Hardwick’s a good example. So that presentation standard of Elizabethan parkland and how that fits with...the story of Bess of Hardwick and the hall and the general managers they’ve had in there over the years and their ideas of what is correct or incorrect for that presentation. There’s been quite...direct [instruction], “we’ll go this way and...behind these trees you can stack timber, we don’t want to see any dead wood in these places.” And some of that is...about the individuals involved and what they want, what their view is on what looks nice and what they think their visitors will like, and here [at Calke], the take [has] very much been that because it had fallen a bit into disrepair and wrack and ruin when the Trust took over, it’s that un-stately stately home and that echoes out into the park. So the Trust as a whole have taken a slightly different stand here where they’ve allowed if dead wood falls, we’ll leave it where it is in situ. And actually, if it looks a bit untidy and unkempt, it’s not the end of the world’ (Lewney 2024, 464).

Nevertheless, the Trust’s environmental agenda has been integrated into parkland management plans at other estates such as Hardwick which have been interpreted and conserved in a more traditional and manicured style. Over the past ten to fifteen years, the team at Hardwick have amended their approach to tidying to include a greater tolerance for standing and fallen dead wood. Steve Sadler, Lead Ranger at Hardwick, brought attention to one particular tree during a site visit in 2023 (Figure 33) along the northwestern entrance which would have previously been felled as part of standard operating procedure but in line with changes over the past decade was instead pruned and left as a fungal and invertebrate habitat (Sadler 2023). As part of this strategy, there have also been active efforts at intentionally creating more dead wood habitats through processes of tree veteranisation which involves deliberately damaging younger trees to encourage natural decaying (Sussex Wildlife Trust n.d.).

Graham: ‘...over the years, how [has your] dead wood management policy changed?’

Sadler: ‘To be honest, it totally changed from what we used to do. In the parkland, any wood that falls, whether that’s a branch or a tree, we’ll leave it all...rather than in the days gone by, where [it] looked untidy we would only leave it in places that weren’t really seen by people driving through the parkland. Now, we just leave it.’

Graham: 'Okay...is the only time they get limbed or removed is if it's a safety hazard?

Sadler: 'Exactly yes, any paths, buildings, car parks, footpaths whatever. Then we would remove them.'

Graham: 'And [is there] a veteran tree management policy in place as well?'

Sadler: 'Yes, there is. All part of the conservation plan. But we do have a guy...from Hatfield Forest that has come up and done some veteranising techniques on some of our trees, whether that's mimicking lightning strikes or literally ripping off branches [and] we have invited the rangers from the region to see [that] in action.... So we've done that before and we'll continue to do that' (Sadler 2025, 544-545).



Figure 33. Snag in Hardwick Park (author's photo)

Notably, since a site visit was undertaken in

August 2023, Hardwick Estate has further revised their approach to parkland maintenance which now mirrors that of Calke Abbey's. A repeat consultation with Sadler in June 2025 revealed internal developments in their estate management plan which aims to create a 'wilder' aesthetic within the registered parkland, the wider let estate, and the broader cultural and touristic experience of the Elizabethan prodigy house:

Sadler: 'Yeah, so since [August 2023], we're going through this thing called a whole estate plan. And that's literally looking at commercial, retail, gardens, visitor experience, land and nature. So we're going through a land and whole estate plan and my arm of it is the land and nature vision. So we've now got a twenty-five-year vision of the estate, which is basically a 'wilder Hardwick'. So anything to do with restoring nature, because that fits with the new National Trust strategy, ending unequal access, inspiring millions

of people for nature, we're going to be carrying out as much of that as possible' (Sadler 2025, 546).

At Osterley Park, the neoclassical architecture and interiors designed by Robert Adam and the formal gardens (which are organic-certified) are juxtaposed against a rougher parkland. Head Gardener, Andy Eddy acknowledges that while the Trust has placed further emphasis on an environmentally-friendly dead wood management policy, standard operating procedure has been to leave dead wood in situ since its management was taken over by the Public Works Department in 1949 (Eddy 2023, 800). Today, these substantial dead wood assemblages are preserved as exceptionally valuable habitats for local wildlife (Figure 34). Under Eddy's management, Osterley has further complemented them with a more general acceptance of 'untidiness' in this historic wood-pasture landscape. Moreover, his commentary mirrors Jon Lewney's (Calke Abbey) earlier statement on balancing perspectives on parkland aesthetics with what creates the most benefits for nature:



Figure 34. Assemblage of dead wood, brambles and brush in Osterley's Great Meadow, a forty-acre parcel in the southwest corner of the parkland. Anecdotally, a wild hare was spotted leaving the habitat during photographing (author's photo)

Eddy: '...I have to wear two hats or three hats, because one of my hats is being...the head gardener. And you know we've restored this eighteenth-century garden and eighteenth-century landscape. And so one of my hats is...being the original earl and looking out his windows at the Great Meadow, and...that should be a meadow by theory, no brambles, only trees in the copses. And then with my conservation hat on, I realized that it's good to have some clumps of brambles, it's good to have the...open pastureland. So half of its

going back to a conservation management plan here and working out...the aesthetics of the eighteenth-century landscape...but also part of it is doing the other [conservation] stuff' (Eddy 2023, 804).

The team at Wimpole Hall are working on striking a similar balance between delivering environmental outcomes while maintaining a historic parkland that retains a certain degree of aesthetic tidying. However, according to Wimpole's Farm and Countryside Manager, David Hassall, the vast majority is left where it falls. Additionally, as with the work undertaken at Hardwick, Wimpole is developing a programme to increase the amount of dead wood habitats across the estate. Furthermore, ecological surveys carried out on the estate have provided concrete evidence of the biodiversity benefits from high levels of dead wood retention.

Graham: 'under your...management system...how are... dead wood habitats managed? Or...what's that kind of balance there between thinking of nature [and presentability]?

Hassall: 'Yeah, we have a dead wood management plan, since 2012 it's been implemented. It zones it into three different areas within the parkland, based on the presentation standards and the significance of the location within the parkland. About 10% of the parkland, I would guess, lies in the area where we'd actually clear any fallen dead wood. The rest of it is managed in situ. Some of that is tidy up and stack. Vast majority of it is "leave it where it falls"... This year, we're looking at commissioning a programme of veteranisation. So we've got a significant age gap in...the age structure. So we're looking at actually doing some veteranisation work on younger trees and older trees to make them survive longer, younger trees to make them die off a bit quicker. To actually try to close that gap, we do surveys of dead wood [invertebrates]...the last one was...about 1100 species of dead wood beetle just in the parkland alone. So we have a very substantial population. It shows that we keep our dead wood here. And yeah, that is one of those ones where, leave it! Saves you work. No one really minds the look of it...I think it adds to the parkland aesthetic. It gives it a sense of age and depth and weird, crooked mystery. Nettles that then grow around it is your problem, and that is something that we're needing to face into at the moment of, actually, once you start to build up those levels of dead wood, how would you actually manage those nettles, which

actually do start to change the aesthetic of the parkland themselves’ (Hassall 2024, 840-841).



Figure 35. Large amounts of dead wood and associated nettle growth in the parkland adjacent to Wimpole Hall (author's photo)

Independently-owned estates consulted during this research have also, to varying degrees, taken steps that mirror the environmentally-focused approach to parkland management exemplified by Calke and integrated into other National Trust properties more generally. While Calke’s landscape benefits from its styling as the ‘un-stately stately home’ which facilitates a hands-off method of parkland management, other sites have found ways to promote ecological wellbeing within more ‘traditional’ designed landscapes outside the auspices of the National Trust and its longstanding conservation mission.

Lord Kerry of Bowood House in Wiltshire stated that they have begun to integrate similar approaches to dead wood management, stating that within their Brownian parkland, ‘80% of these habitats remain untouched. Where the fallen timbers, etc, are deemed hazardous they will be tidied or removed by chipping’ (Kerry 2024, 286). Like Bowood house, the 330 acres of parkland at Burton Constable Hall in East Yorkshire was designed by Capability Brown between 1772 and 1782 and has served as a space for the promotion of local biodiversity since Natural England began delivering funding in 1999 for the restoration of the original Brownian landscape. According to Grounds and Parkland Officer, Dave Nassau, in the years since restoration began, opportunities to make spaces for nature have increasingly been taken. Now that the replanted

trees are reaching maturity, questions around tree thinning and dead wood have become more relevant (Figure 36):

Nassau: 'After twenty years, the fences have done their job now so we can start reducing them and thinning the tree clumps out...but once again, it's ideal for all the wildlife. Sometimes leaving [the trees] alone is probably one of the best things you can do.'

Graham: 'So for instance...leaving some dead wood rather than harvesting all of it, that's something that...is a newer approach?

Nassau: 'Yep. Yeah, yeah, leave it, absolutely fine for the wildlife. Even some of the trees, instead of taking the full tree away, leave so much of the trunk, ideal for woodpeckers' (Nassau 2023, 368).

The value of these dead wood habitats for the maintenance of a healthy ecosystem within the parkland was repeated later in the interview when discussing balancing the use of the historic landscape for commercial purposes while protecting its value to wildlife. When BBC Radio 1 hosted their Big Weekend festival at Burton Constable in 2017 they requested that areas of the parkland be tidied up, which Dave Nassau declined to do:

Nassau: 'This is the area where the Radio 1 Big Weekend wanted us to take all the low hanging branches off, all the dead out the trees. But if we would've done that, you would've had no woodpeckers now. Old tree, leave it! Absolutely ideal for the



Figure 36. Tree removed from clump which was retained as a hibernaculum in Burton Constable Park (author's photo)

woodpeckers' (Nassau 2023, 376).

At Holkham Hall, conservation initiatives have taken centre stage while under the direction of the current 8th Earl of Leicester. In addition to their sustainable farming and waste reduction programmes, Holkham's dedication to environmental sustainability directs the supervision of Holkham Park. Sue Penlington (2024, 658) remarked that while Holkham had already incorporated an allowance for standing dead wood, their focus on dead wood habitats more broadly has increased over the past several years under current conservation director, Jake Fiennes. In response to interview questions about if and how they utilise dead wood habitats for environmental gain at Holkham, Penlington remarked:



Figure 37. Dead wood snag in Holkham Park (author's photo)

Penlington: 'So, there's two sorts of approaches. One is standing dead wood, so we'll leave certain trees that are dead, like that one (Figure 37), yeah, stood up so great habitat for bats, all of the invertebrates and so on. And then, like you say, it's creating those, kind of hibernaculum...on the floor, creating the piles of dead wood' (Penlington 2024, 653).

Like the other sites consulted in this research, she confirmed that when it comes to the removal of dead wood, it is safety, rather than aesthetics which is the deciding factor:

Penlington: '...exactly that, yeah. It's the safety aspect. And if it was too close to the path, we'd probably knock it over and then leave it lying on the ground...so you've still got that habitat for detritivores and things like that' (Penlington 2024, 657-658).

When dead wood has needed to be shifted, they have found ways to put it to practical use while retaining its biodiversity value. A large veteran tree in Holkham Park (Figure 38) is one such example, wherein dead wood has been used as a barrier and continues to provide ecological benefits to its wood-pasture environment by maintaining saproxylic insect supporting habitats.

Penlington: ‘It's our very unsubtle barrier to try and keep people off. So too much footfall, you get compaction, and then the roots don't like it. And just to, you know, preserve it really...if kids start peeling bark off it, then you've got an open wound that disease can get in, just things like that. So other parklands, like Burghley will fence their trees off with sort of formal rope or whatever. And Lord Leicester doesn't want that’ (Penlington 2024, 667).



Figure 38. Veteran tree with dead wood barrier in Holkham Park (author's photo)

Dead wood management at Mapperton estate is a more complicated picture, another example of the interplay between aesthetics and nature conservation, characterised by a similar area-specific approach to Wimpole Hall. Furthermore, as with Wimpole and Hardwick, they are taking steps to create additional dead wood habitats through deliberate damage to younger trees:

Kingston: ‘So we've got the arboretum directly to the south of the gardens. I'd say pretty much no dead wood is allowed to remain there. In the two registered parks... It's probably not relevant because not a great deal comes down anyway...there's not a massive amount there. It's not...your Stourhead...type of parkland...it's quite sparse in,

in comparison, but certainly in the rest of the woodlands, as I said, because a lot of them are on such steep slopes, there's not a hope in hell that we can remove any from the woodland. So we're doing quite well on dead wood habitats and ring-barking on certain trees as well, to create the standing dead wood.'

Graham: '...thinking of...veteranisation...are [there] veteran trees that are present on the estate?'

Kingston: 'Yep, there are veteran trees on the estate. And again, we've identified those, thinned around them. And we'll keep identifying those veteran trees to take them forward' (Kingston 2025, 750).

The presence of mature and veteran trees in the wood-pasture landscapes of historic parkland has been a driving factor in their recognition as priority habitats (JNCC 2011). Modifications to the management of those historic trees and the dead wood habitats associated with them have had a substantial impact on the biodiversity value of these landscapes; the ecological survey carried out at Wimpole is evidence of their benefits to ecosystem health. Moreover, beyond demonstrating practical changes in approaches to dead wood in registered parklands, the foregoing interview material has yielded insight into how these changes have required a renegotiation in the objectives of landscape management and a shift in the visual expectations among site stakeholders and the visiting public. In fact, a 2025 study by Britain's Forest Research agency sought to examine this public perception of dead wood in more detail with Stowe Gardens and Knepp Estate used as case studies at opposite ends of a spectrum of formality. While overall, respondents either felt positively or neutrally about dead and decaying wood in either context, 'visitors to Stowe were relatively more likely than visitors to other sites to believe the landowner should remove the tree', with visitors to Knepp 'relatively more likely than visitors to other sites to believe the landowner shouldn't remove it' (Brockett, Clements & van der Wielen 2025, 19). This contrast carries implications about expectations of presentation standards within similar habitats in different cultural contexts. If both Stowe and Knepp are defined as 'wood-pasture' landscapes (Knepp 2026a; National Trust n.d.m), yet one is more likely to be accommodating of 'untidy' elements then the deciding factor is ultimately whether the primary significance of a particular landscape is understood to be one of ecology or heritage. It is this dichotomy in landscape significance which is currently undergoing a renegotiation among internal and external stakeholders.

In the 'rally against tidiness' that Jon Lewney referred to as their guiding mantra in the management of Calke Park, the tolerance and accumulation of dead and decaying wood is

merely one of two key components. The other is the health and species density of wood-pasture grassland and woodland flora. As outlined in the priority habitat action plan for wood-pasture and parkland (JNCC 2011) these landscapes are a product of historic land management systems for which the presence of grazing animals is essential even in contemporary contexts (Perry 2015, 2). Historically, these grazed grasslands have been key sources of economic productivity on these rural estates. In addition to the arable operations presented above, these pleasure grounds have served equally important purposes as pastoral farming landscapes. Williamson (2012, 49) points out that while modern appraisals of the landscape park have typically regarded them as ‘aesthetic artefacts’, this view would not have been shared by their contemporaries for whom these landscapes served equally important roles as centres of agricultural production. While these parkland landscapes have retained this productive function, there has been a shift away from intensive, output-focused grazing towards conservation grazing which places equal, if not more importance on the ecological role of grazing animals in wood-pasture landscapes to maintain species diversity and structure in its grassland (Defra n.d.a; Lewney 2024, 493-494). Along with the visual effect that a reduction in stocking densities has on the state of parkland, such as that in Calke Park following deintensification, revisions to mowing and trimming policies in parkland management plans is another significant shift away from tidy and manicured standards of landscape maintenance. Together, these modifications in the management of wood-pasture grasslands and related flora are a necessary complement to the ‘rally against tidiness’ in historic parklands which are managed for the benefit of the environment.

Grass and Scrub

At Calke Abbey, the contrast between the state of the lime avenue in previous decades with how it appears today is a key example of the relationship between the visual experience of landscape, its ecological health, and wood-pasture management systems. As it has been shown, changes to stock levels deliver an immediate impact on both the health of grasslands as well the growth and development of trees and ultimately its value to nature-based climate solutions and increased biodiversity (Chang *et al.* 2021; Jerrentrup *et al.* 2014; Van Uytvanck & Verheyen 2014). At Calke, these changes to stocking levels have had a widespread impact across the park. Beyond the reversion of large swathes of the estate from intensive arable to grazed wood-pasture which will be considered along with rewilding projects in Chapter 5, the parkland is managed to support healthy sward and scrub levels through a combined approach involving mixed rotational grazing and reduced mowing (Lewney 2024). As a result of its historically rougher condition, there has been a less dramatic change to ‘tidy-minded’ grass and

scrub management in Calke Park relative to other country house parklands. However, revisions to stocking levels and mowing regimes have taken place while under the care of the National Trust as part of a wider process of agricultural deintensification and environmental conservation. When asked to comment on how these sorts of changes has affected Calke park's landscape over the years, Bill Cove remarked:

Cove: 'The look of the parkland...pre-2004, it would've just looked like a barren landscape. In all honesty, you know, looking back at it, that's what it was, really heavily grazed, really heavily trampled' (Cove 2024a, 504).



Figure 39. Wood-pasture in Calke Park (author's photo)

As a result of pastoral deintensification, Calke Park's grassland is characterised by a diversity of species and varied structure (Figure 39). The reduction in stock numbers is one element when it comes to monitoring grazing for healthy grasslands, the other being the appropriate management of livestock varieties. Rotational grazing, using a mix of livestock, primarily sheep and cattle, is a means of managing and maintaining a diversity in sward species and height (Jerrentrup *et al.* 2020) and this is taken into consideration as part of Calke's overall wood-pasture and parkland management strategy:

Graham: '...so the long-term vision for Calke in relation to its wood-pasture parkland... thinking about that as a management scheme...what would be...the main ways in which you manage that wood-pasture in a sustainable way...?'

Lewney: 'So what we're looking at the moment is almost a three-tier way of managing that so that the first tier is trees in the ground, is there trees in these field parcels, you know, the very basic...is trees in the field. Then the next element is that scrub layer, if there's a healthy amount of scrub, that's valuable wildlife cover, it also gives you a species diversity mix...the last thing is the grazing levels [and] what condition is the actual sward in itself? So have we got a diverse sward? Is there lots of different things in it? Are there different heights of sward that things can live in, eat, hide in, so that's the way I'm looking at how we judge whether our wood-pasture is in good condition or not...some of...that might be bramble, might be real thickets of blackthorn... So at the moment, I'm looking at Calke Park in particular...we've got that, we've got the trees, the scrub is in...so now we're looking at okay, how do we make that sward as diverse as it can be [and that] might be lowering the amount of grazing pressure from sheep in particular, because they also graze right down to the ground, so you end up with a very lawn-like structure. Well, that doesn't give much variety of sward height for things to live in and amongst...'

Graham: '...so that system of grazing...thinking about levels and maintaining...healthy levels of grass and scrub...is there a particular system that you go about for doing that [or] is it kind of eyeballed...?'

Lewney: 'It's eyeballed. So what tends to happen is we have a grazing review once a year where me, the estate manager, conservation advisor, and our farming advisor will walk



Figure 40. High tuftysward and dead wood in Calke Park (author's photo)

the parcels of the estate and eyeball pretty much all of it. Through the year we'll have regular meetings with the estate manager and the conservation manager and the farming manager separately.'

Graham: '...is the is the grazing managed mixed between sheep and cattle?'

Lewney: 'Yes, sheep and cattle.'

Graham: 'And is there a system in which you shift one out for another based on grazing level needs?'

Lewney: 'Yeah...at the moment a lot of it's based around livestock need.... So, if you've had sheep on pasture for a year, the next year, you could put cattle in there and clean the pasture...like here you can see the cattle were in here this year because it's lovely and tufty. The footpath are the short bits, it's not been mown it's just where people walk (Figure 40). But that says to me that this has been cattle-grazed last year, whereas that has definitely been sheep-grazed' (Lewney 2024, 460-462).



Figure 41. Shorter, sheep-grazed grasses close to the hall in Calke Park (author's photo)

In addition to livestock, Calke has both wild and managed deer herds which are another important consideration in weighing the ecological and cultural values of the parkland:

Lewney: 'We've got enclosed deer, we've got farmed deer, but we've also got a big wild deer population.'

Graham: ‘So I guess the deer would then also, thinking in comparison to cattle but also sheep, would be more likely, they’ll graze within what are more scrubby, enclosed woodland areas?’

Lewney: ‘Yeah, yeah, and they’ll graze scrub, they’re quite happy to eat hawthorn and blackthorn and, so, all these tree guards, a lot of them are damaged because the deer have wanted to get to the sweet, scrubby shrubs that are in them so.... It’s a real interesting balance...and people like to see the deer, that’s another reason that people visit. You can happen upon...a group of them somewhere, you know I happened upon a group of five as I drove through this morning at half past seven and there was like a group just stood on the road here, and even for me where I see them every day and I’m like, “ah, some deer!” [Laughs]’.

Graham: ‘...the deer that are...up by the house...are they purely ornamental?’

Lewney: ‘...they’re purely ornamental. One of the big questions that’s on our team’s lips is that’s quite an important part of the property, the deer park, from a wood-pasture point of view. There’s some really beautiful old veteran trees in there, and the deer stock in it is high, one of the highest in the Trust, so it does get overgrazed. Should we be doing that? Is that the right thing for that piece of the property? ...we’re looking at reducing the fallow. I’ve got half a mind to just get rid of the red altogether because it would give us a lot more grazing units, they’re not historic they don’t really belong here. They’re beautiful to look at, they’re magnificent, majestic animals and it would be a difficult decision for me personally to make, to cull them out, but it might be the right thing for the deer park.’

Graham: ‘I guess then in thinking of a long-term strategy which prioritizes Calke’s value for its wood-pasture parkland that’s the sort of decision-making process which goes into that?’

Lewney: ‘Yeah, that’s part of that decision making process, or expanding the deer park. That’s the other decision, what we could do is build the deer fencing out further, you know, keep our deer herd a similar sort of size but just have a bigger area for them to graze’ (Lewney 2024, 476-478).

As shown above, in addition to nurturing healthy grass and scrub in wood-pasture habitats through improved oversight regarding grazing and stocking regimes, reduced mowing and trimming is central to ecologically-driven management strategies. At Calke, small parcels of the park are mown as needed for overflow car parking (Lewney 2024, 462) and very minimal

portions of the lawn (Figure 42) are maintained as a small means of presentation-orientated tidying. However, the critical difference is a broad reduction or elimination of artificial grassland maintenance for purposes of presentation, and in instances where such work is undertaken, steps are taken to retain its environmental value:



Figure 42. Main south front of Calke Abbey showing minimal areas of mowing, contrasted by sheep grazed areas on their borders (author's photo)

Graham: '...so, areas that you are mowing, you're mowing to be baled? So it's not...just aesthetic mowing?'

Lewney: 'No, no there isn't areas that we aesthetic mow. The lawns we do aesthetic mow, but again, it's wildflower rich hay meadow. So the lawns are really interesting. How they got to be so wildflower rich, I don't know.'

Graham: 'Do you bale those as well?'

Lewney: 'Yeah, they get bailed off [at the] end of the season, one of the last things we do sort of August, is take the bales off there. To give them every chance to flower and set seeds that they can' (Lewney 2024, 474-475)

When Bill Cove returned to Calke in 1997, the Trust further reduced grass and brush cutting including areas of more enclosed woodland within the park. For example, along the main drive inside the entrance, a large parcel of thick brush and sward (Figure 43) had previously been meticulously maintained:



Figure 43. Area along main drive which was previously cleared (Google Maps 2024)

Cove: ‘...if [you’re] coming down the hill from the pay point...to the bottom of the hill, just before you get to the ponds, on your left there's a track going up the bank...all that area to your left...before I started with the Trust, that was all gang mowed every week through the summer. So that whole area was just completely bare under the trees, round all the trees. And Tim, one of the rangers said, “well I used to do it every week with the gang mowers, it looked lovely!” He said people used to go there, picnic and sit on the banks. But of course, it's all within the...NNR...and when I came I said, “...how can we get away with doing that? We just can't do that.” So that was all stopped at that point and it's developed to what it is now.... There's masses of bramble there...birds...it's a fantastic little section to come down because there's all sorts singing and shouting in there [laughs]. Whereas as a bare field it was just like a municipal park really with trees in it’ (Cove 2024a, 517).

In much the same way that estates under the care of the National Trust have renegotiated their policies around managing living and dead wood for environmental gain, similar changes have been made to how other Trust properties apart from Calke Abbey care for areas of grass and scrub in their historic parkland. Osterley Park's Great Meadow (Figure 44) serves as an excellent example of how environmental concerns at the Trust have supplanted decades of historical over-management:

Graham: 'So, thinking about some of that parkland, some of that grazing land or some of the meadow area there. How [has]...in the time that you've been there...the National Trust...refocused its mission....to better address these kinds of environmental issues...[and] how has this been implemented there at Osterley...?'

Eddy: 'I can give you one really glaring example, before the Trust got Osterley back, because the Trust was given Osterley in 1948, but without the endowment, so it couldn't afford to run it. So, it handed it back to the government and the building was run by the Victoria & Albert Museum and the outside were looked after by the Public Works Department. And all they did was look after the trees and mow everything in sight. So, our Great Meadow, for instance...hasn't been farmed, or ploughed for hundreds of years. One guy worked here for eighteen years, and he would start mowing at the front of this [forty-acre] meadow on a Monday and finished on a Friday. And he did that for eighteen years. So that was a complete waste of his time, complete waste of fuel to be doing it. Because all we do now, as soon as I came in here was we took it back, and once a year we put the cattle in for two months to graze it. And that's job done.'

Graham: 'So there's no mowing or anything there?'



Figure 44. Osterley's Great Meadow showing grazed grass on either side of a naturally trodden desire line (author's photo)

Eddy: 'No mowing at all. I mean, we might do a little tiny bit of topping just to tidy that up. But it's...that mindset change from, you know, a person being employed and using all

that fossil fuel to actually putting the cattle in, which is far better. So it's those sort of things that have changed generationally.'

Graham: 'And so that shift to just...managing the grasslands through the grazing, was that a change that was taken during your time there? Or was that before that?

Eddy: 'Well, it had been done slightly differently before that, but I did persuade the farmer to put his cattle in once a year. I mean, I think they used to, they used to bale it and you can get rid of it that way rather than just mowing every week. But it's the different aesthetic, I mean, it was all about in the middle of the last century, and it was usually male dominated, but it was still about control and having everything, after the Second World War, having everything tidy, mowing everything and keeping everything tidy. So, it's the mindset that's changed, isn't it?' (Eddy 2023, 799-800)

Like the changes in stocking densities which have occurred at Calke as part of their deintensification, Osterley Park similarly assesses livestock numbers to avoid overgrazing now that the meadow remains unmown:

Eddy: 'We're [in a] level one stewardship scheme. So for instance, the cattle that have gone into the...meadow now...we've got an eye on the numbers per month and whatnot.'

Graham: '...so what all does that provide funding for...?

Eddy: 'It's not very much, actually. And we've been looking at it and wondering if it's worth our while, because the amounts are so low.'

Graham: 'And what sort...of limitations...[does that put on]...what you can do in the park?'

Eddy: 'Yes, it does. Because, you know...we don't feed the cattle when they're in there, for instance, it's just grazing. Whereas normally, because the farmer wants to graze the land down quite tight. Usually, he would feed them some concentrate while they're in there, because they're only really getting roughage. But we don't do that, because it's part of the stewardship scheme. So we are reevaluating whether we want to be part of that, whether it's worth our while or not. We're still managing the land well, we'd just be doing it slightly differently from [under] the stewardship, which is one size fits all' (Eddy 2023, 812-813).

This question of whether or not participating in government-funded environmental schemes is the best fit for balancing 'green' parkland management strategies with fiscal sustainability was

recently a point of discussion at Holkham Hall. Conversations with Sue Penlington on parkland mowing strategies yielded the following insight on navigating the complexities of building natural capital while remaining financially secure as an organisation:

Penlington: ‘...you can see there's certain areas that we mow for events and for the visitor attraction.’

Graham: ‘Looks like closer to the house.’

Penlington: ‘Yeah, exactly...and then there’s various other areas. So historically, up until two years ago, this was in HLS, High Level Stewardship scheme, and we got...the income from that, and that income went straight to the Game Department to manage the deer herd. We took the decision to come out of that HLS agreement because of...a change in use. ...the challenge with the deer park is managing it for the balance between commercial tourism and a traditional deer park. So you'll see we've got a wedding happening by the lake there (Figure 45)... Then we've got a cycle event, and just the commercial activity in the park has increased in the last ten years, and instead of getting a derogation every time, just the decision to take it out commercially, we can get better income from the other big events’ (Penlington 2024, 648, 650)



Figure 45. Holkham's North Park with visible contrast between mown areas being used for commercial events and grazed pasture (author's photo)

Outside Holkham’s deer park, mowing is undertaken for commercial events within the East Park where grassland was similarly removed from the HLS scheme:

Penlington: ‘...so this is called the East Park. And again, this was within the stewardship scheme. We took it out because we have an annual camp, a pop-up campsite...here for eight weeks.’

Graham: ‘So is anything done to prep for that? Or...is this just...sheep grazed?’

Penlington: ‘They’ll mow. They mow a little area for them to lay pitches out.... Prior to that we had Camp Elwood, which was a kind of, more of a festival vibe. So again, yeah, it’s, it’s using it for a leisure purpose, really. And then the other ten months a year, well, it’s not grazed for ten months. But so again, it could probably it could be more diverse as a grassland. The challenge, though, is that we need a slightly manicured lawn for eight weeks of the year... and again, so the income from that campsite is significantly more than the stewardship scheme’ (Penlington 2024, 677-679).

Moving further towards Holkham’s park boundary, mowing was also addressed along the South Avenue (Figure 46) leading towards the house. As part of this, Lord Leicester was involved in negotiating a balance between ‘traditional’ aesthetics of presentability and the promotion of natural capital:

Penlington: ‘So you can see we mow either side [and] when we first started to look at sustainability, I asked the gardeners, “why do you mow both – why do you mow the south drive like you do?” And of course, the answer was, “because we always have”...and so I said...“how about you only mow one width of the lawn?”’

Graham: ‘So they were mowing essentially just all the way up?’

Penlington: ‘They were doing another row like this, yeah, so another three metres and...then they thought, well, actually, that will halve our time on the mower. ...if we went that way...when you get to the obelisk...they then go to two widths. Lord Leicester wanted two widths there.... Here we’ve seen a clustered bell flower come back that was in the soil that we’ve not seen for fifty odd years, because of that...lack of mowing’ (Penlington 2024, 696-697).



Figure 46. South avenue at Holkham showing reduced mowing widths (author's photo)

Concurrent to changes in mowing practices, Holkham have adjusted their approach to trimming and tidying areas of overgrowth around individual trees and clumps. Nettle and weed growth within the parkland (Figure 47) is now left, rather than tidied. In discussing these changes, Penlington highlighted the influence that individual perspectives among management on parkland aesthetics can have on the biodiversity value and climate resilience of the landscape:

Penlington: ‘...we got a new MD five years ago, and the old MD was very much obsessed with presentation and neatness.’

Graham: ‘I noticed, because that was one thing I thought was the amount of nettle that’s grown up around here, around the trees.’

Penlington: ‘Yeah, which we never used to have... we used to have some nettles around the trees for the deer to fawn in. But there’s definitely a lot more. So in the past, all of this would have been strimmed to maintain that sharp presentation.’

Graham: ‘Under the previous MD, so that, how long ago was that?’

Penlington: ‘Five years? So it’s a mix of change in attitude in general, because, you know, we so we’ve got our sustainability agenda strategy and it’s about enhancing biodiversity... It’s about improving natural capital, and it’s about reducing carbon. So you know, mowing less is better for biodiversity. It sequesters more carbon, and we’re saving the fuel plus the financial savings, sort of quite a win-win’ (Penlington 2024, 650-651).



Figure 47. Nettle growth in Holkham North Park (author's photo)

In contrast, Wimpole Estate tends to remove these areas of nettle undergrowth within central areas of their parkland as a means of maintaining a certain standard of presentation while leaving most other areas of the parkland unmown. Regarding mowing, topping and undergrowth clearance within the registered parkland, Farm and Countryside Manager, David Hassall, discussed the following and highlighted the economic concerns in maintaining a sharp standard of presentation:

Graham: ‘...thinking of that...the maintenance of some of those aesthetics of tidiness is stripping those or mowing those sort of areas to maintain some of...that visual experience?’

Hassall: ‘That's what we're looking at the moment. And it's about getting that balance right. And it's got to be down to the individual areas. We don't have the resources for one to manage it as a manicured landscape as it once was and that's just the reality of it. So let's not even kid ourselves that we'll try, you know. So we'll pick the highest priority places, and we'll look to address them where it's necessary. Much more difficult in an organic system, you can't just weed wipe your nettles away. So...it's all about diesel and manpower and time to get rid of these things, and petrol...’

Graham: ‘...so...how is mowing approached within the parkland?’

Hassall: ‘We mow in paths. So when we want desire lines to be between kind of gates, etc and bridges, will mow in a path, nice, wide, wide mowing path to avoid funnelling people too much and a sense of spread and of naturalness to it. We will, you know...if

we've got too many thistles in a certain area, we'll top it. We do hay cuts in quite a lot of it, so we cut for hay and clear that way. But we do very localised only as needed kind of topping to address it. It's not like we'll cut Lake Field six times in a year as a top to maintain it as a kind of lawn aesthetic. It's not really what we're going for here.'

Graham: 'So I guess, could you kind of say, in short, that a lot of the mowing is approached – there is a certain element of tidiness to it, but rather than...a finely mown lawn, it's on an as needed basis, or even in terms of thinking of just park accessibility, so of the spread of people and pathways...'

Hassall: 'Yeah. So it's a way of controlling business pressure, but it's more the stuff that the livestock don't do, I suppose. So the livestock do the grass. We do the thistle and the other bits...the nettles...and the brambles occasionally that they don't get at.' (Hassall 2024, 841-842).



Figure 48. Mown paths in parkland at Wimpole (author's photo)

As part of a larger push towards environmental sustainability across all three of the estates held by the Cecil family which are managed in partnership under Gascoyne Estates Ltd, Hatfield House has enacted major management changes to deliver better outcomes for nature. Peter Mitchell, Head of Sustainability for Gascoyne Estates, remarked that during his period of employment (2019-) Hatfield have completely revamped their approach to parkland management:

Mitchell: 'In the time that I've been here, we've gone from a completely manicured mown heavily managed...wood-pasture landscape to now...we're probably mowing 75% less. We're allowing things to get tall and woody and rough. And, you know, the core areas directly in front of the house, areas that we use for public events, we will mow and maintain in that traditional sense [but] we've got cow parsley that's twice the height of me...that's grown, died, gone woody, and it's still there, and we've got a really long grass.'

He continued,

'I think we increasingly are also seeing it as a working landscape. So...we've grazed sheep in the parkland, we've got our mob grazing operation [that] has come through certain areas of the park as well. And I think, as you alluded to before, it kind of is a reversion to what that landscape was prior to the industrialisation of farming. Where we are in Hertfordshire was primarily dairies, it was lots of grazed grass. It's only become an arable landscape in the past seventy or eighty years. And the park was just part of that productive landscape. And our definition of what productivity is in terms of land is changing and that's really important. And that means that...what was once perfectly green manicured lawn no longer has to be and I think that's a good thing (Mitchell 2023, 592-593).

At Burton Constable, they have made similar moves away from mowing as a means of grassland management and have shifted entirely to input-free grass control through a system of conservation grazing and reduced topping levels:

Nassau: '...the approach we've taken very much over the last, really, three, four years, where we've now come away completely of sprays [and] fertilisers. We haven't put any fertilisers in any of the grasses now, probably pushing ten, twelve years....we had a bit of a battle educating the tenant farmers to come away from weed control...we've gone with the smaller vehicles with smaller toppers and done it that way. And we've found it's we've got a lot better result very, very quickly. So no pesticides get used on any one of the fields now' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 298).

At Bowood, mowing is still used as a means of grassland management where, as at Holkham, particular attention is given to areas used for commercial events. However, they have worked to reduce mown areas within the estate by about 20%. Currently, the estate's 2000-acres of parkland is under a roughly 70/30% share between grazing and mowing, with areas of

permanent pasture operating under a grassland management plan which focuses on conservation grazing rather than high-density, high-output stocking (Kerry 2024, 287).

Like the changes made in stocking levels at Calke Abbey, or the prioritisation of conservation grazing over high-density stocking at Bowood House, Dave Nassau of Burton Constable Hall has worked with their tenant farmers to enact similar changes for the mutual benefit of parkland and the quality of agricultural product. Furthermore, it is illustrative of how these estates have had to negotiate these changes with the other individuals who work their land.

Nassau: 'We work very closely with the tenant farmers [and their cattle were] grazing it too harshly. So honestly, it's a way of trying to talk to local farmers without patronizing them and proving a point: look, if you take a couple out, reduce your numbers, you can have more grass, which is better for obviously, the wildlife-based side of it. Also, the sheer look of the park's a lot better. Working so closely with them, they actually started listening to us and last year, Rich had the best cattle he's ever had' (Nassau 2023, 302).

As pastoral landscapes, the pursuit of environmental objectives has required a deintensification, or at least a renegotiation of ideas around agricultural productivity within parkland settings. Revisions to stocking densities and a shift towards emphasising the ecological role of grazing in wood-pasture habitats reflects a broader evolution in operational paradigms among historic estates – a point taken up in more detail in Chapter 6. While they have retained their function as working landscapes since their creation, as Williamson (2012, 49), points out, these historic parklands have primarily been regarded as 'aesthetic artefacts' in modern contexts, mirroring the art historical and curator-led perspectives which have dominated understandings of historic parkland. As Quest-Ritson (2001, 1) pointed out, 'garden history has been abducted by the art historians'. Consequently, while there is a correlated reconceptualisation of their purpose as agriculturally productive landscapes, the heritage significance of these changes in management lies in the rejection of entrenched ideas of parkland aesthetics. This holds true even in light of practical considerations such as David Hassall's (Wimpole Hall) observation that they simply do not have the resources to maintain its former highly manicured standard of presentation (Hassall 2024, 841). DeSilvey (2017, 11) highlights this massive amount of energy expended to freeze heritage artefacts as static cultural mnemonic devices. Furthermore, interviews with estate staff have shed light on the means by which these estates must weigh financial considerations and environmental goals – the use of certain areas of Holkham Park for commercial events is a pertinent example. However, as priority habitats which are now critical to addressing contemporary issues of biodiversity loss

and climate change in England, the delivery of these environmental strategies has ultimately demanded a revision to those former standards of manicured presentation and the ideologies of landscape conservation which informed them. Evidenced by the foregoing interview materials, parkland management systems in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were defined by the maintenance of ‘sharp’ and ‘tidy’ landscapes. It is noteworthy that, Calke Abbey notwithstanding, presentation standards within the country house have been defined by formality, order, and politeness, which can thus be interpreted as echoing out into the parkland in heritage contexts. Indeed, the research report by the Forest Agency on public perceptions of dead wood indicates that even still, associations of formality in a particular landscape context invite differing perspectives on the presence of dead and decaying wood (Brockett, Clements, and van der Wielen 2025, 19). Hence, the ‘rally against tidiness’ that has increasingly defined parkland management plans among England’s estates has created a visual experience of parkland in opposition to established ideals of the country house as a heritage artefact. Furthermore, it problematises the binary division between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ which has historically underpinned the conservation philosophies of the authorised heritage discourse by merging environmental considerations with historic and contemporary cultural expressions (Harrison 2015, 24). Thus, these revised approaches to parkland maintenance (Table 2) constitute a contestation of an elite-led ‘authorised landscape discourse’ identified by Santos & De Los Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo (2020) and reflect the convergence of natural and cultural environments central to ecomuseology (Brown 2024; Borelli & Davis 2012, 34).

Site	Complete or increased in-situ dead wood retention	Reduced maintenance of grass and scrub	Conservation grazing
<i>Calke Abbey (NT)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Hardwick (NT)</i>	Yes	Yes	Not mentioned
<i>Osterley (NT)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Wimpole (NT)</i>	Yes	Yes	Not mentioned
<i>Holkham (NT)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (via HLS scheme)
<i>Bowood (Ind)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Burton Constable (Ind)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Hatfield (Ind)</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Mapperton (Ind)</i>	Not in parkland, wider estate only	No	Wider estate only

Table 2. A review of the case study sites mentioned in Chapter 4.1. In line with this chapter's thematic format, methods of creating 'untidiness' are separated by dead wood retention, reduced mowing and clearing, and changes in grazing pressure.

Significantly, these estates have also undergone a corresponding shift regarding landscape significance in farmland settings beyond the park pale. Environmentally-driven changes in parkland stewardship have been primarily defined by a reconceptualisation of aesthetics in historic designed parklands complemented by an attendant review of their role as productive pastoral landscapes. As the following section will uncover, the implementation of sustainable and environmentally-friendly farming systems has also required a change in farmland aesthetics; for example, a reduction in hedgerow trimming for a 'tidy' appearance. However, and more importantly, these ecological farming initiatives are indicative of an evolution in ideas of productivity and the significance of largely arable landscapes within England's landed estates by moving away from long-established norms which have prioritised productive maximisation. If contemporary perspectives on estate parkland can be interpreted as a reconceptualisation of polite landscapes, then those regarding estate farmland can be understood as a redefining of productivity. Thus, the following chapter moves from the ornamental ecosystems of historic parkland to their wider arable landscapes, exploring how long-standing tensions between productivism and biodiversity are being renegotiated within contemporary estate farmland.

4.2 Estate Farmland: Productivity and Biodiversity



Figure 49. Thomas William Coke inspecting sheep at Holkham. Improved husbandry was a major feature of the agricultural revolution and Coke of Norfolk was famous for his experimentations in selective sheep breeding. There is a discernible contrast between him, the educated and refined agricultural improver and his working shepherds. Painted by Thomas Weaver (Weaver 1808).

‘I see the country of England smiling with cultivation; the grounds exhibiting all the perfection of agriculture, parcelled out into beautiful enclosures, cornfields, hay and pasture, woodland and common...’

Tobias Smollett, *Travels Through France and Italy* (1766, 197)

Agriculture Improved

Largely concurrent with the centuries in which formal or naturalistic parks and gardens became central to the design and construction of elite residences, ideas of ‘improvement’ became embedded in their cultural and economic frameworks, driving social and political concerns among the upper classes. A broader paternalistic ideology that influenced both rural and urban communities across the empire, it fostered sweeping agricultural changes informed by obligations of productivity within a nationalistic and Christian moral framework (Warde 2011). The word ‘improvement’ had been in occasional parlance since the early sixteenth century, yet the term was largely restricted to legal use in reference to raising the rental values of land (Sørensen 2023, 561). By the mid-seventeenth century, ‘improvement’ had coalesced around agrarian interests which focused on increasing the productivity of agricultural land (Martins 2004, 1-7). This interpretation was exemplified by agricultural treatises such as Walter Blith’s *The English Improver*, the second edition of which included added guidance on the use of legumes in crop rotations and herbal leys (Blith 1653). However, by the turn of the eighteenth

century it had become a fundamental part of England's governing culture; an all-encompassing philosophy which extolled the benefits of social and material progress in all its forms (Slack 2015, 1). The effects of this social and political movement can be seen throughout English society at the time, not least in the landscapes of the nation's landed estates and the cultural milieu of their owners (Williamson 2007, 6). Within the boundaries of country house parks, these landscapes were transformed into scenes of polite leisure 'for the benefit of the great and good' (Rotherham 2017, 5). Beyond the park, agricultural landscapes were 'improved' in the pursuit of productive maximisation through agrarian innovations and the reorganisation of land within a cultural framework of moralistic and paternalistic public good (Wilmot 1990, 4).

Ideas of defined periods of 'agricultural revolution' during this period have been subject to considerable debate, with five separate periods between 1560 and 1880 having been identified as phases of 'revolution' (Allen 1999; Overton 1996a, 1; 1996b; 1996c; Kerridge 1969; Chambers & Mingay 1966). Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that English agriculture underwent a significant transformation between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the achievement of any one of these 'revolutions' being an increase in cereal yields per acre (Campbell & Overton 1993). A detailed account of this transformative period including systems of enclosure and the growth of agrarian capitalism, or debates around the utility of the term 'agricultural revolution' requires more space than the present work allows. As such, the focus rests on perhaps the most significant development in agricultural practice and output maximisation during the period – the use of fodder crops, particularly clover and turnips, in new systems of crop rotations and convertible husbandry (Overton 1985, 205; Kerridge 1967, 181). In the three-course crop rotation which dominated much of the lowlands of medieval Europe, fields rotated annually between spring sown crops, winter sown crops, and fallow. The field that lay fallow was manured through the grazing of livestock and then turned over to arable the following year (Gies & Gies, 2016, pp. 131-132). By the later eighteenth century, this system had been supplanted by the 'Norfolk four-course' rotation which involved planting wheat, fodder turnips, barley or oats, and an herbal ley annually over a four-year cycle (Shorrocks 2017, 19-20). Within this system, the integration of grazing livestock into fields under herbal leys, supplemented by fodder turnips, yielded increased animal nutrition and soil fertilisation (Thirsk 1987, 56). Indeed, both contemporary writers and recent agricultural historians have claimed this practice was central to the transformation of English agriculture and the increase in agricultural productivity which occurred over the post-medieval centuries (Overton 1996a, 1).

The historical implications of this rise in farm outputs are broad and the relationship between early modern innovations in farming and wider narratives of industrial revolution and the growth

of the British state have been given attention elsewhere (Wrigley 2010, 26-90; Allen 2009, 57-79; Overton 1996a; Jones 1974). The primary significance of these agricultural developments to the present work are twofold. Firstly, to be discussed later, these historic forms of agricultural intensification are now being reintegrated as environmentally-sensitive solutions to unsustainable farming practices on English estates in the twenty-first century. Secondly, these perspectives on landscape during the period which prioritised productivity and output maximisation through a duty of improvement would continue throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. The nineteenth century saw further innovations including technological advancements including steam powered machinery, expanded areas of cultivation, and the introduction of phosphate fertilisers from overseas (MERL 2026; Overton 1996a, 33). Though the exact amounts are debated, productivity per acre continued to increase up until the agricultural depression which hit the country in the 1870s when labour productivity in agriculture slowed to the lowest of any sector in Britain (Thompson 1996, 40; Blunden & Curry 1985, 26-27). The next significant leap in agricultural intensification and productivity came following the Second World War in which the widespread introduction of chemical inputs and full mechanisation, encouraged by government subsidies, led to raises in farming outputs at an unprecedented scale (Holderness 1996).

Post-war Productivism

Despite further advances made during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Brassley *et al.* (2021,1) claim that a farmer in 1815 would be relatively familiar with the agricultural landscape as it was in 1939. That same individual, however, would be ‘completely baffled’ by farming systems of the early 1980s, a result of rapid intensification and further industrialisation of British farming after the war. In fact, relative to post-war farming systems, agriculture between the 1870s and 1939, has been referred to as the age of traditional ‘dog and stick’ farming, or lacking in modern standards of productive maximisation, despite following centuries of agrarian innovations (Brassley 2000, 60). Brassley (Figure 50) shows the exponential growth in British agricultural production which followed the Second World War. However, the direct consequence of these efforts at maximising food production has been the decline of the nation’s natural biodiversity (Robinson & Sutherland 2002, 157-158). Indeed, Bowers (1985, 75) went so far as to say that the lasting achievement of post-war agricultural policy has been its effect on the British landscape and its degradation of the natural environment. Just as current governmental policy has helped direct the implementation of sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices in recent years, legislative intervention encouraged the intensification of British agriculture during and after the Second World War (Bowers 1985). Before wartime

agricultural efforts scaled up home production, the UK was the largest importer on the world market, including 50% or more of total imports of wheat, feed grains, beef, butter, and bacon (Brassley *et al.* 2021, 91). To redress this dependency on a global import market during wartime, the UK government introduced a series of agricultural price assurances, bolstered by the Agricultural Development Act of 1939 which paid farmers £2 per acre for ploughing up permanent grassland (Brassley *et al.* 2021, 92). The 1947 Agriculture Act built on these policies, continuing to guarantee minimum prices for key agricultural products in an effort to keep production levels high (UK Parliament 2025). In the following decades, governmental support for agricultural maximisation and self-sufficiency was complemented by an ever-widening range of agrochemical and agro-industrial developments. While the intra- and inter-war periods were marked by a growing, but limited number of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a massive increase in available inputs produced by an expanding agrochemical industry (Shorrocks 2017, 31-41). Consequently, while the output increases during the Second World War were achieved by increasing overall arable acreages, post-war output growth was increasingly realised by maximising agricultural yields; the same acre of land in 1985 could produce three times as much wheat as it could fifty years earlier with one-fifth of the labour force (Brassley *et al.* 2021, 2).

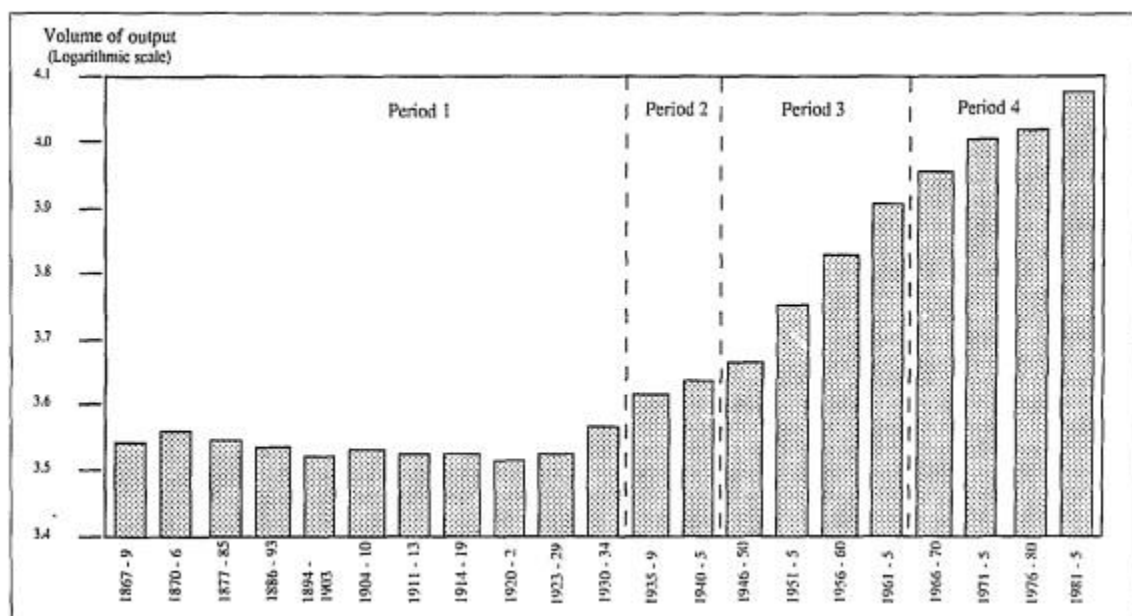


Figure 50. Agricultural output in Britain, 1867-1985 (Brassley 2000, 62)

With the United Kingdom's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, British agriculture became enmeshed with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EEC and became part of a broader European policy of agricultural maximisation, creating a continental surplus of foodstuffs popularly referred to as 'milk lakes', 'butter mountains' and other satirical

terms to refer to agricultural overproduction (Seidel 2023). This overabundance of foodstuffs came as a result of the CAP's basic function as minimum price guarantees in which the EEC would purchase surplus agricultural products, incentivising maximised production through price assurances beyond market demands (Malherio 2024). In 1992, the EEC introduced the MacSharry reforms to the CAP which began to lower payments from agricultural output in an effort to reduce overproduction. It pivoted towards a direct payment model which paid farmers for the amount of cultivatable land and number of livestock owned and integrated burgeoning support for environmental considerations in farming systems (European Council n.d.). While these reforms failed to change the CAP's core objectives of increased agricultural production, they, along with other reforms to the CAP during the 1990's represent a conceptual shift away from decades of intensification by 'lightly greening' agricultural policy through piecemeal introduction of environmental objectives (Dobbs & Pretty 2007, 766).

Sustainable Agriculture: Full Circle

Governmental agri-environmental funding schemes have grown considerably in recent years. However, they have been a part of the state's agricultural support system in various forms since the mid-1980's, contemporary to what is generally considered the 'end' of the nation's post-war period of intensive, high-input, high-output agriculture, preceding environmental initiatives delivered at the EU level in the 1990s (Dobbs & Pretty 2007). That said, scholars have expressed the need to qualify this shift towards a post-productivist agricultural model, clarifying that it should not be interpreted as an end to environmentally damaging intensive agriculture (Ilbery & Holloway 1997, 184; Bowers 1985, 75). Britain's, and thus the wider European Union's, first agri-environmental scheme was rolled out in 1987 in response to the damage that decades of industrialised agrochemical farming had rendered on the nation's biodiversity and rural landscapes. This scheme, Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs), offered incentives to farmers for integrating environmentally-friendly management practices into existing landscapes considered valuable for their unique landscape, wildlife, or historic value (Natural England 2024). The ESA scheme was followed by the introduction of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) in 1991 with the purpose of sustaining landscape diversity, improving and expanding habitats, conserving archaeological sites and historic features, improving public access and enjoyment of Britain's countryside, restoring neglected land or features and establishing new habitats and landscapes (Carey *et al.* 2003, 73). Touched on in Chapter 3, Burton Constable Hall was one such example of the latter, with the restoration and maintenance of its Capability Brown parkland in 1999 funded by Countryside Stewardship. In 2005, the UK government replaced these two schemes with the Environmental Stewardship

scheme, consisting of 'Entry Level' and 'Higher Level' scheme options. These schemes paid out for environmental land management practices, with the Entry Level scheme being open to all farmers and landowners in England within a flexible, menu-based system of conservation options. The Higher Level strand was more competitive and targeted, with longer contracts and larger areas under designation, but with higher payouts and generally greater environmental outcomes (Boatman *et al.* 2008, 25).

Brexit and the UK's departure from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 2020 marked a major shift in the configuration of state-supported agriculture. Following the UK's separation from the CAP and the phasing out of the Single Payment Scheme (SPS) introduced in 2005 and its 2015 replacement, the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), governmental funding schemes for landowners changed massively and government funding through agri-environment schemes now delivers financial subsidies for environmental gain, summarised as 'public money for public goods' (Bateman & Balmford 2018). The BPS and the SPS which preceded this upheld a general system of payments following the CAP reforms of the 1990s and 'de-coupled' payments from specific crop production to total area of land under 'agricultural activity' (HM Revenue & Customs 2025). However, to replace these, the British government unveiled a comprehensive agri-environment scheme in 2020: Environmental Land Management (ELM). This new scheme was made up of three separate strands: Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) which provided payments to farmers and landowners who manage their land in an environmentally-sustainable way, an updated Countryside Stewardship option which pays farmers to support a range of local environmental priorities and targeted habitat creation, and Landscape Recovery which funds long-term landscape projects such as large-scale tree planting, ecosystem restoration, peatland restoration and the creation or restoration of coastal habitats (NFU 2025). SFI's main objective is to encourage land managers to continue producing food while both ensuring farm resilience and safeguarding and improving the natural environment through a highly flexible, 'pick and mix' approach to facilitate ease of entry (Randle 2024). While the information collected during this research has revealed that some farmers and land managers have doubted the long-term reliability of some of these legislative promises (see Chapter 6.1), these new systems of farming subsidies have begun to generate significant changes in land use across the country. When asked about new developments in arable farming at the Trust, Jon Lewney commented that:

Lewney: 'what's really interesting is recently, I'm speaking to a lot of farmers who are saying SFI has really changed the way they're thinking about their farms... so they are

looking at, well, “can I leave that hedgerow alone?” You know, “can I leave [that], I’ll get a payment for that, so I ought to do that.” Because it’s direct tit-for-tat payment. And so it’s easy for them to go, “yeah, well, I don’t really need to do that. And it will save me on diesel and driver time and actually, I’ll get fifty quid a metre or whatever” (Lewney 2024, 446).

Contemporary shifts towards regenerative agriculture, like those supported through SFI, make for interesting case studies within agri-heritage contexts in that ‘progressive’ approaches to farming often involve a shift back to earlier or pre-industrial agricultural methodologies. In the words of Jake Fiennes, Holkham Estate’s Conservation Manager, ‘regenerative agriculture is not a new form of agriculture, it is about learning from the past and implementing for the future’ (British Ecological Society 2025, 4). These pre-existing forms of agriculture which Fiennes claims are being re-implemented into regenerative systems may include the use of cover crops, crop rotations, particularly those which utilise herbal leys, convertible husbandry and a reduction or wholesale disuse of synthetic and artificial fertilisers and pesticides. (High Weald n.d.). Rather than a strict farming methodology with a defined set of practices, ‘regenerative agriculture’ can be conceptualised as an approach to farming centred around improving environmental health through five core principles: minimising soil disturbance, keeping the soil covered, maintaining living roots in the soil, maximising plant diversity, and the reintroduction of livestock (RASE 2023). As an ideology and a practice, regenerative farming is a turn away from conventional farming systems which have dominated British agriculture since post-war intensification. While some scholars (Sumberg & Giller 2022) have contested the discursive value of the term ‘conventional’ in this context, it is generally conceived as an intensive, productivist farming system that depends on a high level of artificial inputs and mechanisation with little to no concern over environmental degradation (Van Rijssel *et al.* 2025; Rodale 2025). In contrast, if all farming systems were placed on a linear spectrum, organic agriculture would sit at the opposite end to conventional models. Unlike the term ‘conventional’ which uses a broad brush to describe various farming strategies which may utilise all or some of the agrochemical and industrial mechanisms available, ‘organic’ refers to a singular definition subject to legal regulation and regular inspection by a certification body. To achieve organic status by one of the UK’s certifying bodies, farms must, in addition to other livestock-based requirements, avoid all synthetic fertilisers and use solely naturally-derived pesticides in only extreme or restricted circumstances (Soil Association n.d.). Consequently, regenerative farming can be conceived as a movement, a perspective on modern agriculture that seeks to balance the environmental impacts of farming with decades of productivist-driven agricultural systems,

often through the reintegration of earlier agrarian practices. Therefore, in contrast to organic certification, regenerative approaches are flexible and allow for the use of conventional agrochemical methods in transitioning to sustainable and eco-friendly farming models in order to maintain output.

These environmentally sustainable farming strategies are increasingly being adopted on large landed estates across England as part of a broader range of environmental conservation efforts such as those documented in this work. In fact, some popular media outlets have claimed that these rural estates are ‘leading Britain’s green revolution’ (Wakeham 2021). Of these ‘eco-estates’, Holkham has established itself as an industry leader, bringing a legacy of agrarian innovation into the twenty-first century. They state clearly and directly that their ‘vision is to be the UK’s most pioneering and sustainable rural estate’ (Holkham 2025a) and this mission directive sits at the core of how they manage their 4000 hectares of farmland in addition to a number of other ecologically and historically significant landscapes.

Holkham

While Holkham’s modern reputation as an environmentally-focused estate had been developing since Edward Coke (1936-2015), the 7th Earl of Leicester and a keen farmer and rural enthusiast took control of the business in the 1970s, it has been under the direction of the current Earl that Holkham has grown into an industry leader among the nation’s ‘eco-estates’ (Gillbard 2024; Blackett 2021; Wakenham 2021; The Telegraph 2015). Since 2005 under his role as Holkham’s estate manager and since 2015 as the 8th Earl, Thomas Coke has steered the estate forward, reviving and expanding on a familial legacy of pioneering innovation in matters of agriculture and environmental interests. In doing so, he recalls his ancestor and namesake, Thomas William Coke (1754-1842), 1st Earl of Leicester who, alongside other prominent figures such



Figure 51. Exhibition on Holkham's regenerative agriculture and conservation work (author's photo)

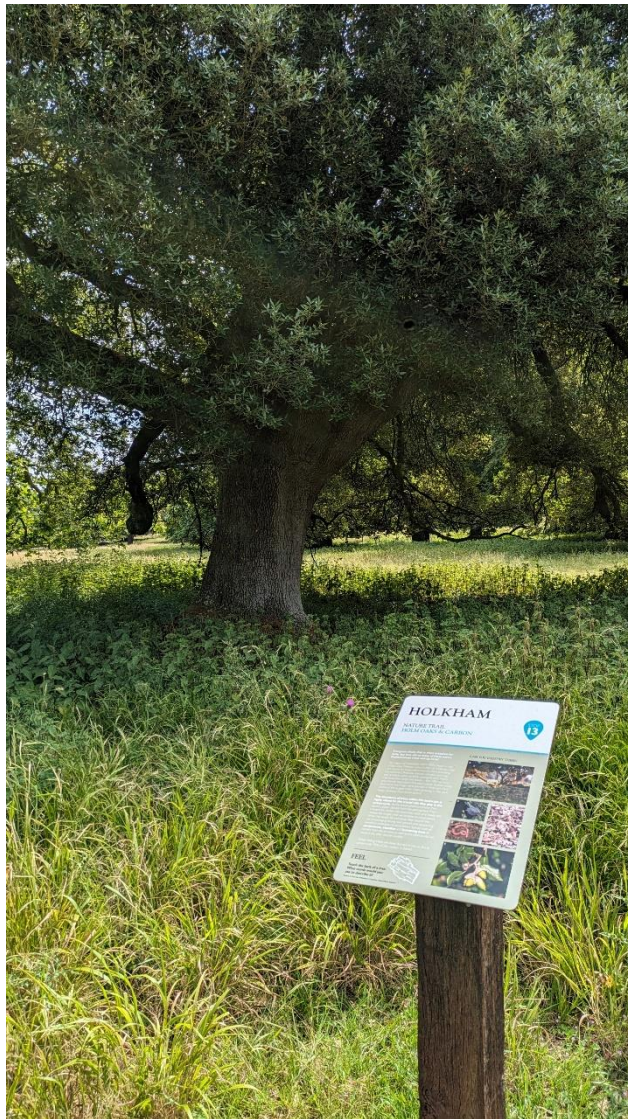


Figure 52. Information point in Holkham Park (author's photo)

as Jethro Tull or Charles Townshend, is known as one of the leading figures of the agricultural revolution of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Martins 2009; 1980).

Today, Holkham's environmental sustainability programmes have coalesced under their action strategy titled, WONDER, a multi-pronged approach to sustainable agriculture, conservation, waste reduction and carbon neutrality launched in 2020 (Holkham 2025b). The visitor experience at Holkham reflects their commitment to current issues surrounding the natural environment and their exhibition on sustainable farming (Figure 51) ties their current work into the broader history of the estate. In doing so it deepens the connection between its heritage value and landscape ecology, contrasted by the more conventional visitor experience of the house tour. Moreover, dotted around its publicly

accessible parkland are information points (Figure 52) concerning their numerous sustainability projects. Maintaining this ecological focus throughout their parkland which welcomes 250,000 visitors (Penlington 2023, 633) per year carries significant implications on how this historic country seat relates to and is perceived by the public. While these sustainability projects and climate action plans run the gamut, from reducing the carbon footprint of the estate's housing, to a year-on-year cutback of non-recyclable waste, their landscape strategies are the focus in this research and their in-hand adoption of regenerative agriculture and generation of natural capital are covered here as a primary example of the contemporary approaches to sustainable farming methodologies employed by an increasing number of historic estates.

Regenerative Agriculture at Holkham Estate

The implementation of regenerative practices at Holkham is flexible and subject to the requirements of particular landscapes or crops. An internal farming framework document supplied by Penlington outlines Holkham's interpretation and application of the five regenerative principles mentioned earlier, while adding a critical sixth, 'Context Considered', referring to the need for reflective analysis and informed nuance when working to deliver sustainable farming outcomes in the long-term (Penlington 2025). For example, minimising soil disturbance is highly dependent on particular soil and crop requirements, evidenced by the following conversation on soil cultivation at Holkham:

Graham: '...I know that there are some efforts as well in certain places to reduce...ploughing and tilling and try and discourage carbon release from soil turnover. How is that undertaken here?

Penlington: 'So, we've tried direct drilling. We've tried strip tilling, where...you literally plant into one strip, so you cultivate a small area. We've tried reduced cultivation, so shallower, less aggressive, and they all have different results in every field. Every field...has its own situation and its own weather and its own crop, so the approach we take is to do the cultivation that's necessary. So, in some areas, yes, we can direct drill. Fantastic. In other areas, no chance in hell of direct drilling. So, then they look at minimal cultivation, and we've got figures that show how much fuel that's used, how much metal that's used. Ten years ago, the go to was to plough everything, deep cultivate everything, you know, turn your tractor up to the biggest throttle possible, and rip it apart. And now it's very much on that individual field sort of basis' (Penlington 2024, 695).

This data-led, trial-and-error approach, contrasted by the more invasive and rigid commercial farming methods that have been commonplace since post-war intensification is a defining example of the balancing act between ecological gains and agricultural productivity. It parallels Dave Nassau's (Burton Constable) comment on delivering environmental outcomes while balancing the needs of a historic parkland and their tenant farmers, 'a lot of it is talking and treading gently, gently, softly, softly...it's that fine balance, you get it right, you get it wrong' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 302). In discussing the implementation of environmentally sensitive farming practices, Penlington mentioned a separate historic estate elsewhere whose experience corroborates this need for flexibility and patience in adopting regenerative principles:

Penlington: ‘They got cattle, sheep, ponies, back onto the land, and then they put their arable into “regenerative”, which what they did was they removed all the inputs day one...all the fields and plants basically went cold turkey, having relied on it [laughs]. The crops failed. The yield was appalling. The bottom line didn't match up...well, hang on a minute. That's one crop, one harvest, and you've gone cold turkey. If you actually had done the regenerative principles over the course of a crop rotation for even five years, you would have learned more’ (Penlington 2024, 741).

Though minimising soil disturbance reflects a departure from earlier methods, the principles of contemporary regenerative agriculture largely employ historical farming practices developed and popularised by early modern agrarian improvers: crop rotations with the use of fodder and nitrogen-fixing crops and integrated livestock. Nevertheless, this research does not interpret this as an intentional return to form, but rather a consequence of the rejection of the intensive agrochemical farming systems that dominated Britain’s post-war agricultural landscape. As a result, there are significant parallels between current sustainable farming environments and their historical predecessors. This connection to the past figures prominently in how Holkham situates itself within its historical narrative and this idea was raised in conversation with Penlington:

Graham: ‘...that’s a question we can...touch on [with] the agriculture we're thinking about, the connection to sort of [historic]...agricultural practices and the implementation of that, so like crop rotations [et cetera] and then the way that that plays into not only rethinking contemporary agricultural practices, but also Holkham as a house, connecting that to its historical past and again, sort of making, from a heritage perspective, making those linkages.

Penington: ‘Yeah and I think that's fascinating, because we've come full circle, haven't we? Where it was a four-course crop rotation, and we had integrated livestock, and then post-war, you know, absolutely strip everything out, high-input food production, and now we've gone back to the longer crop rotation, the same principles of the livestock, etc, etc. So really interesting that we've gone full circle’ (Penlington 2024, 659).

Though regenerative farming systems broadly include the introduction, or more sensitive management, of wildlife supporting habitats within agricultural landscapes, the use of these historic farming methods ‘are at the forefront of what we talk about’ in regenerative farming (Gregory 2025, 791). In reference to their regenerative farming programme on the 11,000 acre Goodwood estate in West Sussex, the estate’s farm manager remarked that these strategies are

‘simply re-learning what farmers did...before chemical farming came along’ (Wheatley 2025), echoing Fiennes’s observation that sustainable farming learns from the past to address challenges of the future (British Ecological Society 2025, 4). The following section will explore how Holkham and other estates have come ‘full circle’ by reimplementing these historic methods, before broadening in scope to shed light on how these agricultural landscapes are being remade to support biodiversity and climate resilience alongside food production.

Historic Agriculture Reapplied: Crop Rotations and Integrated Livestock

The historical four-course crop rotation Penlington refers to involved a rotation of wheat, fodder turnips, barley or oats, and an herbal ley rotated annually over a four-year cycle. This field system improved upon the three-course rotation that dominated medieval European agriculture wherein cereals and sometimes nitrogen-fixing legumes were alternated with fallow fields over a three-year period (Shorrocks 2017, 19-20). In a similar way, Holkham has implemented a six-course rotation that follows the same principles, but with a wider selection of crops beyond barley and wheat cereals, including oil seed rape, potatoes, and sugar beet while utilising varieties of nitrogen-fixing plants for herbal leys popularised by early-modern agricultural improvers (Lane 1980, 18-24). A roughly four-hectare field at Holkham planted with an herbal ley (Figure 53) had unfortunately been cut the day before visiting, but serves as an example of one particular stage within Holkham’s current system of crop rotations:



Figure 53. Field that had been under mixed herbal ley the day before photographing (author's photo)

Penlington: ‘So this is Sod’s Law, isn’t it? Yesterday, this was a herbal ley. So this is under the regen farming. And this is two- or three-years mixture of sainfoin, lucerne...basically

a mixture, clover... a mix of herbs and legumes. It's a soil improver. So there's nitrogen fixing plants that are fixing nitrogen [into the] soil. The roots are going down, breaking up the pan, etc, etc. This has now been cut for silage, so again, that will go and feed our cattle.... It's been cut now...but this is also grazed sort of periodically throughout the year. So an example where previously this was an arable field in the rotation. In two years' time, this will go back into that arable field.'

Graham: 'Okay so how many years, do you have it under [herbal leys]?'

Penlington: 'Three' (Penlington 2024, 683-684).

Through Holkham's emphasis on experimentation and data informed decision making, their system of crop rotations can be subject to change based on the needs of the crop while simultaneously working to develop methods which are productive, efficient and ecologically sustainable:

Penlington: 'Oil seed rape is very challenging to grow at the moment, we had a ban on neonicotinoid seed treatment, which is a chemical that...can damage bee populations, so it's the right thing to do. [Oil seed rape] gets decimated by cabbage stem flea beetle as well as pigeons, so we're trying different ways of growing it. We do what's called companion planting, where you grow it with buckwheat. Buckwheat grows taller, hides the plants from the pigeons and the pests and diseases, then frost, automatically, naturally kills the buckwheat, and then that leaves your oil seed rape to grow. So [because] oil seed rape is challenging at the moment [and] it's a break crop, so it's what we'd put in between barley and wheat, for example. So we're looking at other break crops, including peas and beans. So they're legumes, they naturally fix nitrogen into the soil. We can also harvest them for our cattle, so looking at those sort of different crops. In five years time, maybe we'll be growing soybeans' (Penlington 2024, 688-689).

Expanding on their approach to crop rotations, Penlington remarked on having to reframe their approach to assessing financial viability and crop values, acknowledging the need to balance economic output with environmental health:

Graham: 'So we have this field here that is now under crop rotation, you know, sort of a historical method of crop rotation, rather than being grown every year and heavily fertilised or sprayed, in terms of what the actual output is for that, how does that compare? How does that stack up?'

Penlington: 'Financially?'

Graham: 'Yeah, is it as productive? Or is it, you know, I realize that long term, that sort of year on year on year, eventually you reduce the quality of the soil, but –'

Penlington: 'Yeah, interesting. So we look at the productivity of the farm across the whole rotation cycle. So we're in a six- to eight-year rotation. Some crops, like potatoes, they're our most profitable crop. They'll make a huge revenue...but you can't grow potatoes in the same field every year. So then, hence the crop rotation. Sugar beet is also commercially great for us. Barley is okay.... At the moment, oil seed rape are really rubbish financially. But if you take it as an average across the rotation...you're still getting a decent return. So it's even within the crop rotation, it's looking at that longer term thinking, rather than just the cash crop every year. And the tenant farm we took back in-hand, which we'll get to, was just growing potatoes, carrots and parsnips. So they're real high, high value items. They were just growing them in the same field year after year, absolutely destroying the soil. And we've taken it back. We've put quite a lot of it into the herbal leys expecting, hoping that that will restore the soil. So you know, we're not making a great income from that farm for the first five years, but once the soil is back in a better condition, then we can start getting going again.'

Graham: 'Okay, so what's the timeline for a...six course rotation...how many years under each –'

Penlington: 'So every crop is only one year. So it's the same as the historic one, so no two straw cops follow each other, [et cetera]' (Penlington 2024, 687-688).

As with the use of herbal leys which provide ground cover and soil nutrition in between yearly cash crop planting cycles, cover crops, otherwise known as 'green manures', refers to non-cash crops grown between separate cash crop cycles as a means of enriching and shielding the soil by maintaining living roots in the ground when it would otherwise remain bare (SARE 2021, 137). With historical antecedents that stretch back to antiquity, the practice of cover cropping became common during the early modern agricultural revolutions and is being reintroduced as part of contemporary regenerative strategies supported through SFI funding (Defra n.d.b). Like their integration of herbal leys in multi-course crop rotations, cover crops are a vital part of Holkham's in-hand farming strategy and in addition to serving valuable purposes of soil health, provide necessary feed for grazing animals, both through the creation of silage and through the

use of overwinter cover crops. Holkham's substantial potato operation provides an example of how they maintain living roots in the soil throughout the year:

Penlington: '...we grow early crop salad potatoes. They'll all be harvested by the end of October.... We grow cover crops before potatoes. We repair the soil straight away. So as soon as they've been harvested...it'll go straight into, I think winter barley, so we don't leave the soil uncovered' (Penlington 2024, 694).

Since visiting Holkham in June 2024, the potato crop in question has been a successful and valuable demonstration in delivering regenerative farming goals. Previously thought 'impossible' to do so, the 10-hectare field of potatoes grown without any synthetic inputs was achieved without any loss in yield, marking a significant milestone in the viability of regenerative strategies on a larger scale (Gillbard 2024).

The combination of living roots in the soil, whether cash crops, cover crops, or herbal leys, with grazing animals employed in Holkham's system of crop rotations marks another step away from post-war productivist monoculture to earlier forms of soil management and fertilisation (Burchardt 2002, 171). Mixed farming, up and down husbandry, convertible husbandry and integrated farming all refer to farming methodologies which incorporate livestock into arable agriculture systems. Along with keeping living roots in soil, the incorporation of both arable and pastoral farming into one system is another pillar of regenerative food production. Moreover, it is another component of pre-industrialised agriculture for millennia and a primary feature of arable systems from the medieval period to the nineteenth century which is increasingly being reintroduced (Broad 1980, 77-78). At Holkham, the use of grazing animals to support plant and soil health has become central to their in-house regenerative farming operations:

Penlington: '...we used to have a core herd, flock and then buy in to graze on the cover crops in the winter. We're now sort of less grazing the cover crops, more grazing all year round...which I'll show you some herbal leys. So our actual flock size itself has increased slightly, [they're] very much a grazing tool, but the byproduct is obviously lamb. ...so the grazing outside of the park is more on cover crops and herbal leys than grassland... And they're effectively mob grazed, so the shepherds will move them through the crop, across the different cells, which then stimulates more growth, prevents trampling, etc, etc. So they, they get a better live weight gain from herbal leys than they do grass and actually better than cover crops as well' (Penlington 2024, 682, 718).

This reimplementation of historic farming methods – crop rotations, consistent soil coverage, and grazing livestock at Holkham is part of a larger trend of integrating regenerative practices within conventional farming systems among historic estates. Regarding the implementation of these practices at Hatfield, Peter Mitchell of Gascoyne Estates explained their process which covers both their operations at Hatfield Estate and their Cranborne Estate in Dorset:

Mitchell: ‘...so we typically run a seven- or eight-year rotation...typically comprising wheat, barley and some sort of legume, and at least two years in seven under grass or clover...So, we're not always growing crops in every field at all times [and] we mob graze for a double soil health benefit...we have about 30% of the in-hand farm being grazed at any one time. We basically cover crop as a rule almost immediately after harvest. So as soon as the combine's over, the drill is going out to cover crop, and we would see that as a central tenet of regenerative agriculture. And that's kind of one of the core things that is very easy to do. And we see the benefit of it. ...as a rule across both of our farms, we do that. Again...Cranborne's been doing it for twelve years, Hatfield's been doing it for three or four’ (Mitchell 2025; Mitchell 2023, 586).

Tom Gregory of Marsh Farm at Mapperton estate mentioned a similar incorporation of crop rotation and integrated livestock for their regenerative farming operation and as with Peter Mitchell's statement above, highlighted the significance of these two key principles to regenerative farming systems:

Gregory: ‘I think the term regenerative would always be as broad as it is long and mob grazing and herbal leys will always be sort of at the forefront of what we talk about [and] at Marsh...this is the support block for our dairy farm. So we grow heifers and we grow silage. So...the arable, what was an arable rotation up there, is now just continuous herbal leys that... we predominantly cut for silage through the summer, and then [add] compost and then bale graze in the winter... And the arable rotation that we do on a different block of land is four years of spring crop cereals, which are by-cropped followed by diverse cover crops, and then herbal leys’ (Gregory 2025, 780, 791).

As the National Trust's only estate with in-hand arable farming operations, the charity's environmental interests are embedded in the zero-input, organic-certified farms on the Wimpole estate. The estate's Farm and Countryside Manager, David Hassall, provided insight into their organic systems, but highlighted difficulties with implementing regenerative strategies

on specific soil types, particularly without the ability to use certain chemical inputs when needed that is permitted in non-organic regenerative contexts:

Graham: 'The next question was going to be...about cover cropping.'

Hassall: 'We don't do a huge amount of cover cropping. We really struggle with termination on cover crops because we don't have herbicide sprays...and on our heavy land, our working window in the spring is tiny, you know, the land is saturated. So actually, we don't do a huge amount of cover cropping.'

Graham: 'Yeah, okay, so...then...I guess the question would be, is that something that, were you able to implement that if your sort of climate situation or landscape situation was a bit different, that would be on the table, it's just that it doesn't necessarily work for that particular landscape?'

Hassall: 'Yeah, well, it's the organic question...I would love to use them, you know, no one wants bare soil, so I'd love to use them. We have [kind of] used them...this spring, we lost some oat crops, and things got so wet over the winter that some died off. So we've used them as kind of a boost over the summer, just to get...some nitrogen fixing and some...organic matter back into the soil.... But over-wintering cover crops we rarely use, but we'd love to.'

Graham: 'Yeah, okay, I did see that you...practice crop rotation.'

Hassall: 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah... it's good practice for integrated pest management on any farm, really. But it's a six-year rotation that we do. Three of cropping successions of different cereal crops, and then a fertility building ley legume rich ley for three years in that time as well after that, then build up fertility which then allows you to crop it afterwards.'

Graham: '...do you practice any sort of integrated livestock on those fields?'

Hassall: 'Yeah, at half three I'm meeting the grazier who puts the sheep onto the arable fields [laughs]. I would consider, if we're talking arable... then it's sheep. They do very little compaction on a well-established ley [so] it's not something I'm overly concerned of. It's why we don't use cattle, though' (Hassall 2024, 835-836, 840).

As has been pointed out, the use of crop rotations and integrated livestock are critical to contemporary sustainable farming strategies and by reintroducing these historic agricultural practices, 'we've come full circle' (Penlington 2024, 659). Particularly within the contexts of

these legacy estates, it makes for an interesting turn that what was once developed in the pursuit of agricultural intensification and output maximisation is now being reintroduced to mitigate the effects of agricultural mechanisation and the mass-integration of chemical inputs during the latter twentieth century. However, as demonstrated by the evidenced-based approaches exemplified in Holkham's flexible and trial-and-error led regenerative farming systems, it can hardly be interpreted as merely returning to pre-modern agriculture. Moreover, illustrated by Penlington's explanation of how Holkham has needed to redefine their assessments of agricultural productivity by opting for a longer-term perspective rather than a year-on-year output quantification, this reintroduction of historic methods reflects a renegotiation of ideas of productivity more broadly. To deliver benefits for nature within these agricultural estates, post-war approaches to the purpose and significance of farming landscapes has demanded review. In many ways, it harkens back to Norman Clarke's retort that Calke Park 'grows beef...not bloody beetles' (Cove 2024a, 501). In contrast to his rebuke of the Trust's conservation initiatives, estates such as Holkham or Wimpole which have integrated environmental concerns through regenerative practices in contemporary farming have shown that these landscapes can meet both needs. The reapplication of these historic methods is merely one part of the refashioning of these productive landscapes, however, and the integration and improved care of critical wildlife supporting habitats, specifically field margins and hedgerows, is equally vital. The following section examines how Holkham has restored and fortified these areas of farmland biodiversity across their estate and regenerative farming regimes, supported by analogous strategies at other case study sites.

Making Space for Nature: Farmland Biodiversity: Field Margins

Beyond the efforts at reducing the environmental impact of arable agriculture through changes in soil disturbance, the reduction or elimination of artificial inputs, changes in cropping cycles, and the introduction of grazing animals, organic and regenerative systems of agriculture approach the ecological health of arable farmland zones holistically by increasing their overall value as wildlife supporting habitats (Leverhulme 2025). In contrast to conventional farming systems which typically practice cropping up to the field boundary, a core element of regenerative farming is the utilisation of wildlife-supporting field margins, which have been supported by government subsidies through schemes such as SFI (Rural Payments Agency 2025). Defined by Natural England, arable field margins are 'herbaceous strips or blocks around arable fields that are managed to provide benefits for wildlife or to reduce water and soil run-off into water courses. Where they are managed for wildlife they are classed as a priority habitat' (Natural England 2020, 104). While some of Holkham's tenants are yet to adopt these arable



Figure 54. Tenanted farmland at Holkham showing cropping up to the field boundaries (author's photo)

field margins, 'this is some more of our tenant farm...along here, cropped right up to the hedge (Figure 54)' (Penlington 2024, 709), these herbaceous border zones (Figure 55) are fundamental to their in-hand sustainable farming strategies:

Penlington: 'So every field at Holkham has at least three margins around the edge...and we did that before we got the payment for it' (Penlington 2024, 685).

Queries about field margins were raised again later during the visit:

Graham: 'So...this is...obviously...part of all the farmed in-hand.'

Penlington: 'Yes, yeah.'

Graham: 'It looks like there's consistently six-metre margins on all the fields?'

Penlington: 'Yep, yeah, exactly.'

Graham: ‘And how long [has] that sort of approach been taken?’

Penington: ‘Oh God, easily fifteen years if not longer, something Lord Leicester was very keen to implement...like I say, we were doing it before you got funding for it all’



Figure 55. Six-metre wildflower margin on one of Holkham's farmed-in-hand fields (author's photo)

(Penlington 2024, 690).

This discussion on Holkham's use of field margins developed into a wider conversation about approaches to agriculture under the new farming schemes which parallel Jon Lewney's comments on how SFI has changed the way Calke's tenants are thinking about farm management.

Penlington: ‘So since Brexit, we've left the EU, so we don't get the Common Agricultural Policy anymore, and we don't get BPS (Basic Payment Scheme). [With] BPS, you got paid per acre, basically, and it was a flat fee. So with that phasing out, Natural England are delivering Sustainable Farming Incentive...and then also what they call Countryside Stewardship. And then ELM, Environmental Land Management. Under SFI, you now get payments for managing a hedgerow, well you get a payment for surveying a hedgerow, for managing a hedgerow, you get payments for all the margins. You get payments for no insecticides. So in the park this year, we're not using any insecticide. So we'll get a payment per hectare for that, which sort of takes the risk out of not using insecticides a little bit. It helps, obviously, incentivises us to do it. So actually, what we found, cover crops as well are an example, we were doing quite a lot of stuff that we didn't get payments for, but now we can get those payments.’

Graham: ‘...and I guess that's then again, thinking back to, you know, just the money about it, is that if you're going to get a payment for non-insecticide use...it eases a little bit of the pressure, or risk –’

Penlington: ‘Exactly, yeah.’

Graham: ‘Okay...yeah. It’s just...a little bit of padding...so if it doesn't...deliver as much as maybe you did the previous year, you're having income that’s supplemented through that.’

Penlington: ‘Exactly’ (Penlington 2024, 691).

These species-rich arable field margins are associated with the hedgerows that make up natural field boundaries and when considered together are the backbone of Holkham’s programme of natural capital development in arable zones. In *Land Healer* (2022), Holkham’s Conservation Director, Jake Fiennes, uses the term ‘Hedge Porn’ to refer to an ideal standard for these living perimeter belts with regard to their biodiversity value. The hedge he uses as an example (Figure 56) is located at Great Farm, Holkham’s test farm for regenerative strategies.

Penlington: ‘...we're about to go to the Great Farm, which is the scene of the book, “Hedge Porn” [laughs].’

Graham: ‘[Laughs] Okay.’

Penlington: ‘So this is Great Farm. This was the one. Carrots, potatoes, parsnips, absolutely obliterated, you know, massive cracks in the soil, huge gullies of water running off it. So, first thing they did was plan the kind of shape of the fields and the track, awkward corner [points] (Figure 57)...can hear the sky larks.’

Graham: ‘So this is barley?’

Penlington: ‘Barley, yep. This is a cultivating margin (Figure 58). It's got one too many thistles in it at the moment, but they did, there's loads of studies that said

cultivated margins were great for invertebrates. They literally run a

cultivator through it, and then whatever's in the seed bank comes up. So loads of historic kind of plants have come up. No input, so no chemicals, and then they're just topped at the end of the year. So, you know, high profit really, but great refuge for i nverts, once you've got the inverts and you've got the small mammals, birds of prey.’

Graham: ‘So I guess yeah, for this corner here (Figure 57) thinking about, taking it out of active planting. I guess, A. it's easier from a farming perspective – ’

Penlington: ‘Exactly that.’

Graham: ‘ –negotiating that corner, but then also creates spaces for nature.’



Figure 56. Healthy hedge at Holkham's Great Farm with associated wildflower margin (author's photo)

Penlington: ‘Yeah, so hard with the size of machinery, the scale of machinery, crops don't yield that well close to the edge, sort of right next to the hedgerow as well. And you can instantly see hedges.’



Figure 58. Corner of arable field at Great Farm that has been taken out of production and is now species rich grassland (author's photo)



Figure 57. Cultivator margin at Great Farm (author's photo)

Further conversation at Great Farm yielded insights about how Holkham strives to deliver regenerative agriculture in a way that still supports food production and highlights some discrepancies between conventional farming with regenerative philosophies:

Penlington: '....a hell of a lot more margins [up here], some might question too many. So I think it's...40% is environmental up here with 60% food.'

Graham: 'So that's the breakdown for each field. It's forty to sixty?'

Penlington: 'Of this farm. So this is called Great Farm, 40% of the land is in stewardship, and 60% is in food production. On our other farms, we would average between ten and twenty. Twenty-five is probably pushing it in some places. So this is over and above, but part of the reason for doing it was to demonstrate that you can have both and you can have more.'

Graham: 'Sure, okay.'

Penlington: 'Yeah, so this was again, that that was a herbal ley (Figure 58), so that's had sheep grazing on it, but that's to improve the soil...and then then you've got the cultivated margin, and then you've got the wildflowers, and then the hedge, we'll just drive to the top of here. And then this is where, it's not on the cover of the paperback. This is Jake's favourite photo (Figure 56).'

Graham: 'And I guess that's a good example? So, you can see how...it's quite wide.'

Penlington: 'Yeah, exactly, yeah, wide and tall... so like an A shape really, so wider at the base, three metres, two-three metres wide, two metres tall.'

Graham: 'Now, the wildflowers that grow along in these in these margins, were they originally seeded?'

Penlington: 'Yes, yeah... so if you bring a conventional farmer here in inverted commas, they will have kittens that you're not growing enough food, and it looks messy' (Penlington 2024, 722-724).



Figure 59. Freshly cut herbal ley at Great Farm showing substantial field margins (author's photo)

The same sort of field margins referenced by Penlington have been incorporated elsewhere in both regenerative and fully organic farming systems. The value of wildflower margins for pest control is used in conjunction with reduced pesticide application at Hatfield estate:

Graham: ‘are the crops...sprayed just as necessary? Is there any kind of systematic approach to how that's done?’

Mitchell: ‘So, again, it's kind of an attempt to reduce, so we will plant the beetle banks and the wildflower margins and increase the diversity of predator insects which would then help for pest control, we also use livestock in the best control way as well. But we do spray pesticides on certain crops, when there are particular risks. We try not to do it...prophylactically [or] on a set pattern...we're trying to do it on a field-by-field basis. But we are at the moment, not across the whole farm, completely reducing our pesticide use. Where that is changing slightly is that we are now next harvest growing grain for Wild Farmed...[which are] are a regenerative agriculture buyer effectively, and they have their Wild Farmed standards, which in order to sell to them we have to meet. And those have a lower pesticide, herbicide, fungicide use than we would have under a conventional system. So what we're gonna do over the next couple of years, we're gonna be transitioning where portions of our production are going to be under different management regimes. And then we're going to look at the viability of that as we have progressed through’ (Mitchell 2023, 585).

In addition to the independent properties which have introduced field margins as core parts of their regenerative strategies, the National Trust also utilises them in their organic arable operations at Wimpole estate that has also benefitted from governmental funding through Higher Level Stewardship (Hassall 2024, 827). Regarding their use of field margins, Farm and Countryside Manager, David Hassall responded:

Hassall: ‘...so we have...your cost compliance, two metres plus six, which is part of our HLS six-metre margins. Great habitats, great habitat network...some really quite species rich ones now that they've been down for so long, and [also] if your crop fails in the field, you get paid for that margin regardless...and the actual management requirement is very low’ (Hassall 2024, 836).

Moving beyond the field margins which make up the wildlife-supporting border zones between cropped fields and their boundaries, hedgerows themselves are invaluable for farmland biodiversity, with hedgerow conservation policies in Britain expanding since farm subsidies were first provided for their care and restoration in the early 1980s (Barnes & Williamson 2006, 22-23). In addition to their historical purposes of demarcating and dividing the British landscape, hedgerows have become an undeniable part of Britain’s rural character to much the same degree as the historic homes and parklands which feature in the present work. Defined by Defra as ‘any boundary line of trees or shrubs over 20m long and less than 5m wide at the base, provided that any one time the trees or shrubs were more or less continuous.... This includes “classic” shrubby hedgerows, lines of trees, shrubby hedgerows with trees and very gappy hedgerows’ (Defra 2007, 8). Like the historic wood-pasture landscapes discussed above, in recent decades, hedgerows in the United Kingdom have become valued microhabitats which play a vital role in the preservation of the nation’s biodiversity and nature-based climate solutions (Tresise, Reed, and Chapman 2021).

In the twentieth century, hedges were routinely torn up after the Second World War during decades of state-supported agricultural intensification and those which were left were kept impeccably tidy, further degrading the natural environment (Rackham 1990, 191). These efforts at maximising food production resulted in a decline of over 50% of the number of hedgerows across the UK, from 1,000,000km in 1950 to 477,000km by 2007 (PTES 2024). Despite increasing resistance to the destruction of hedgerows during the 1970s and 80s, their removal continued on some level until it was effectively halted under The Hedgerow Regulations 1997 which required landowners to seek planning permission for their removal (Barnes & Williamson 2006, 23). Not only did this piece of legislation officially recognise hedgerows for their

ecological value, but for their heritage and historical significance as well, carrying meaningful implications for their presence within historic landscapes such as Holkham's and further establishing linkages between heritage spaces and environmental sustainability (The Hedgerow Regulations 1997). While the grubbing up of hedges has been effectively curtailed, over-trimming is still a significant ecological issue facilitated by the ease of mechanised trimming and addressing this unnecessary tidying is a key part of environmental strategies on estate farmland (PTES 2024).

At Holkham, Sue Penlington highlighted these issues in post-war farming strategies that involved decades of intensification and hedgerow removals which carried stark ecological consequences and are currently being rectified:

Penlington: '...we ripped out all hedgerows, didn't we, we massively intensified, you know, dig for victory, all that kind of stuff, massive machinery, let's grow food, food, food. And then we had too much food with the kind of Europe food mountains and lakes. And then now that the wake-up call is "oh, we need to look after the soil, we need to put hedgerows back in, we need to put organic manures back in, we need to de-intensify." And so I kind of think, you know, we're coming around full circle with this, within the food and farming system' (Penlington 2023, 638).

In an effort to remedy decades of environmental deterioration due to intensive agriculture, healthy hedges are a cornerstone of Holkham's sustainable farming strategy and nature-based climate solutions. According to Penlington, Holkham is in the process of developing a set of criteria which will serve as a farming standard, part of which requires field boundaries made up of healthy hedgerows (Penlington 2024, 699). In addition to ensuring the field boundaries are hedged through the construction of new hedges or the restoration of existing hedgerows, the preservation of healthy hedges is a multi-faceted process which includes changes to their maintenance as well as wider shifts in agricultural practice. As an estate with both in-hand farming operations and tenanted farms, there is sometimes a discrepancy between how these fields and associated hedge boundaries are managed, which makes for an effective comparison between 'conventional' post-war farming methodologies and the contemporary regenerative practices which Holkham advocates.

This contrast between hedgerow management which delivers environmental gains and the maintenance ideology stemming from an 'it's what we've always done' approach, parallels the 'war on tidiness' that characterises current eco-friendly approaches to parkland management covered in the preceding chapter. As with Lewney's (2024, 470) 'rally against tidiness' at Calke

Abbey, Sue Penlington (2024, 712) remarked that ‘nature loves messiness’, which similarly informs contemporary approaches to caring for arable landscapes and holds true for the hedgerows at Holkham. According to a longitudinal study involving surveys conducted among farmers in 1981 and 1998 ‘tidiness’ was the most common reason given for trimming hedges, with 69.2% of farmers stating they did so yearly (Macdonald & Johnson 2000). This is at odds with current recommendations for best practice which advocate for trimming to be performed every two or three years (Wildlife Trusts n.d.). Holkham has moved to such a three-year management cycle as part of a wider programme of environmentally-focused hedgerow maintenance and restoration:

Graham: ‘How is trimming the hedges managed...are they cut?’

Penlington: ‘Yeah, so roadside hedges are cut annually.’

Graham: ‘For safety?’

Penlington: ‘For a safety point of view, yeah, and then we're moving to a three-year management cycle, where every three years you'll trim them back’ (Penlington 2024, 700).

Discussions on hedgerow maintenance were supported by a visual contrast between ecologically-managed hedges and those in poorer conditions across the estate (Figure 60), yielding relevant information on Holkham’s approach to hedgerow management as well as the collateral damage wrought on natural habitats by conventional agrochemical farming:

Penlington: ‘...we're just coming onto some tenant farms. We joke about the state of the hedges. If you'd come when there was no leaves on them, you'd be able to really see the kind of contrast. But these hedges are overmanaged, or mismanaged. So there's gaps within them, cut really back, really short, back and sides, really, for no reason. You know that there's no detriment to the farming operation.’

Graham: ‘Is that, to some degree...just an example of, again, I do this because that's just what we've done?’

Penlington: ‘It’s what we've always done, exactly that. ...so this is a hedge.’

Graham: ‘Yeah and it looks quite poor.’

Penlington: ‘Horrendous, so totally smothered by ivy. And it looks – ’

Graham: ‘That's...just a gap right there of nettle in between – ’

Penlington: ‘Exactly, and that will be through spray drift. So, and I’m not slating tenant farmers. It’s just being factual, really. No margin. So we’re cropping right up to the base of the hedge, basically... So you haven’t got the beautiful white flowers. And then when the sprayer comes around the corner on a slightly windy day, any [herbicide] spray will drift into the hedge...[and]...will kill the hedge’ (Penlington 2024, 701-702).



Figure 60. Hedgerows in poor condition on one of Holkham's tenanted farms (author's photo)

In contrast to the degraded hedges Penlington referred to on tenanted fields, the healthy hedges Holkham strives for like those shown earlier at Great Farm are part of a bigger environmental plan that beyond simply modifying trimming cycles involves a more complete programme of restoration and hedge planting:

Penlington: ‘So we’ve got a project, Project Hedge, which is looking at baselining the hedgerows on the estate first to know what we’ve got. And then gap them up, so plant in between the gaps. Some of them need actual management, so they’ll need coppicing or pollarding, to get them healthy again.’

Graham: ‘...has Holkham undertaken any kind of processes for rebuilding hedges...or planting more, or just restoring existing ones?’

Penlington: ‘Well, we will through this...hedge project, so we have on a case-by-case basis, so if we’re going into new stewardship scheme, and that farm...would benefit from the hedges. Then we’ve done it on that basis, but we’re now looking at the landscape

scale and proper sort of connectivity, and we're--part of it is resource, we've got one guy that does our conservation work. So he does our hedge cutting, all the wildflower margins, etc. We've not really had the resource to look into the funding schemes that are there and, and now we've got SFI, we can do it as well. So we've done bits and bobs. We've done it where it's right and where we've been able to but I've seen it as one way of instantly boosting natural capital, but also sequestering carbon. So a hedge will sequester twice as much carbon as a woodland...because of the kind of 3D nature of it and the age of it. So it's a great win, win really, isn't it?' (Penlington 2024, 698, 703).



Figure 61. Hedgerow restoration along Holkham's south avenue (author's photo)

In addition to modifying hedgerow cutting cycles, the restoration of dilapidated hedges or the replanting of new hedgerows is a key part of increasing the environmental health of arable farmland in regenerative farming contexts. Referenced above, as part of their natural capital generation strategies, Holkham has been rebuilding lengths of degraded hedges on the estate, including stretches of hedgerow along the south avenue (Figure 61) which was discussed earlier in relation to a reduction in mowing.

Like the adjustments made to hedgerow management at Holkham, Bowood House in Wiltshire is currently reviewing their Land Management Policy for the estate, part of which involves a similar shift away from yearly tidying to a two- or three-year cutting cycle for hedgerows (Kerry 2024, 288). Elsewhere, Marsh Farm at Mapperton estate has undertaken the same sort of approach towards minimising hedge cutting:

Gregory: 'We rent six hundred acres...all of the fields are sort of probably average size of ten acres with big, big hedges that would be allowed to grow out around the outside...and we've extended the hedge trimming regime to sort of once every four or five years, and so incrementally growing the hedges... So, yeah, all the hedgerows across all four blocks of land would be left to grow out and then incrementally trimmed and coppiced or laid' (Gregory 2025, 780, 787-788).

According to Peter Mitchell, Hatfield has also reviewed their hedge trimming cycles through a revised hedgerow management plan which includes the restoration of degraded sections of hedge:

Mitchell: '...we have a hedgerow management plan which lengthens the cutting cycle substantially - I think to three years - and looks to achieve greater depth. We have also done some hedge laying and infilling to give greater density' (Mitchell 2025).

Regarding in-hand management of hedgerows at Mapperton, conversations with Estate Manager Claire Kingston revealed the complexities involved in negotiating the environmental aims of estate owners with the perspectives and requirements of management staff:

Graham: '...Are there other hedges on the estate that that you all handle in-hand?'

Kingston: '...there are some that we manage in-hand. And obviously there are some sort of patch boundary hedges that we manage religiously, because we have to. But there are others in the past have been left to go very wild. And you know, obviously people have very differing opinions on hedgerows and whether they should be nicely, neatly cut every year, or whether they should be left to [grow], which the birds prefer. And I know there are two sides of that coin, but yep, so we have a vast number of hedgerows and, yeah, many of them are not maintained, but some of them are.

Graham: 'Do you think that's kind of a challenge in delivering these kinds of nature-based outcomes on a historic estate which has certain expectations...you know...aesthetic kind of requirements, in a sense....is that a difficult thing to kind of balance and negotiate, the two sort of sides of that coin?'

Kingston: 'Yeah, I'd say the biggest difficulty is the opinions between myself and the owner, because I, from a management point of view, would prefer to see nicely trimmed hedges that don't fall and bash over the fence and fall onto the road. But no, the owners

are very much, they like the sort of billowing, messy, scruffy hedgerows' (Kingston 2025, 769).

This case-by-case basis within systems of hedgerow management and restoration has been similarly incorporated into how the National Trust manages the hedgerows on Wimpole's 3,000-acre estate. On renegotiating their cutting cycles, Farm and Countryside Manager, David Hassall, stated that they have moved from annual cutting to a varied and case-specific basis of up to twenty-five-year cycles:

Hassall: 'We have forty kilometres of hedges on the estate and we are currently working through a backlog of restoration work to get them back into good condition. We have moved from a cut every three years to a more complex mix of hedge management' (Hassall 2025).

Map Colour	Type of hedge	Character	Typical Height	Typical Width	Likely locations	Management
Purple	Mini-shaws	A wide hedge that looks like a small strip of woodland with dense woodland edges.	2.5m-6m	4m-6m	Wherever, there are no constraints on the type of hedgerow.	Cut back severely in small sections as needed to maintain dense growth.
Green	Natural hedge	A dynamic habitat that takes the hedgerows through stages 4-8 of the hedgerow management cycle; starting as coppice stools and	6m	3m-4m	Where there is not space for a mini-shaw style hedge or where the hedge will be harvested for woodchip production	Leave them alone for 15-25 years and then lay or coppice. Adhoc trimming to promote berry and flower production (<20% pa).
Blue	Traditional hedge	Cloudy, informal shape and full of blossom. The hedge is dense and without gaps. Standard trees dotted along the length of the hedge.	1.5-2.5m	2.5m	Where a hedge is permanently required for stock control, nature corridor or landscape impact.	Cutting back to allow 100mm of additional growth on a 5-year rotational cycle. Cut a maximum of 1 face of the hedge each year. Laid when required.
Teal	Conventional hedge	Neat, trimmed hedge. Still dense throughout the height of the hedge with standard trees along the length.	2-4m	2m	Where regular management of drainage ditches is needed or the impact from encroachment onto field margins needs to be prevented	Cutting back to allow 100mm of additional growth each year on a 3-year rotational cycle. Cut a maximum of 1 face of the hedge each year.
Orange	View management	A broad and dense hedge which is strictly managed to a specified height to protect the 152 significant views on the estate.	1.5m	2m-5m	Designed to maintain lines of sight from significant views	Cutting back to allow 100mm of additional growth each year on a 3 year rotational cycle. Cut the top of the hedge each year to the same height.
Red	Roadside – tall	Neatly trimmed, dense hedges in an A-shape or squared.	2m	2m	Where we have a statutory duty to maintain 450mm between the hedge and the highway.	Annual trim back to same place each year (varying slightly to avoid the formation of knuckles).
TBC	Roadside – short	Neatly trimmed, dense hedges in an A-shape or squared.	1.5m	2m	Where site lines are needed above the hedge line for safe driving, typically junctions.	Annual trim back to same place each year (varying slightly to avoid the formation of knuckles).
Pink	Tree line	A line of mature trees.	8m	1.5m	Where space is extremely constrained it is better than no boundary.	Trim the sides on a three-year rotation to encourage vertical growth. Harvest for firewood.

Figure 62. System of tracking hedgerows on Wimpole's Estate with management policy that reflects a more flexible approach (Hassall 2025)

A spreadsheet (Figure 62) and map (Figure 63) provided by Hassall yields some insight into how they have reconstructed their management plan to better maintain the biodiversity value of these habitats through flexibility and site-specific upkeep.

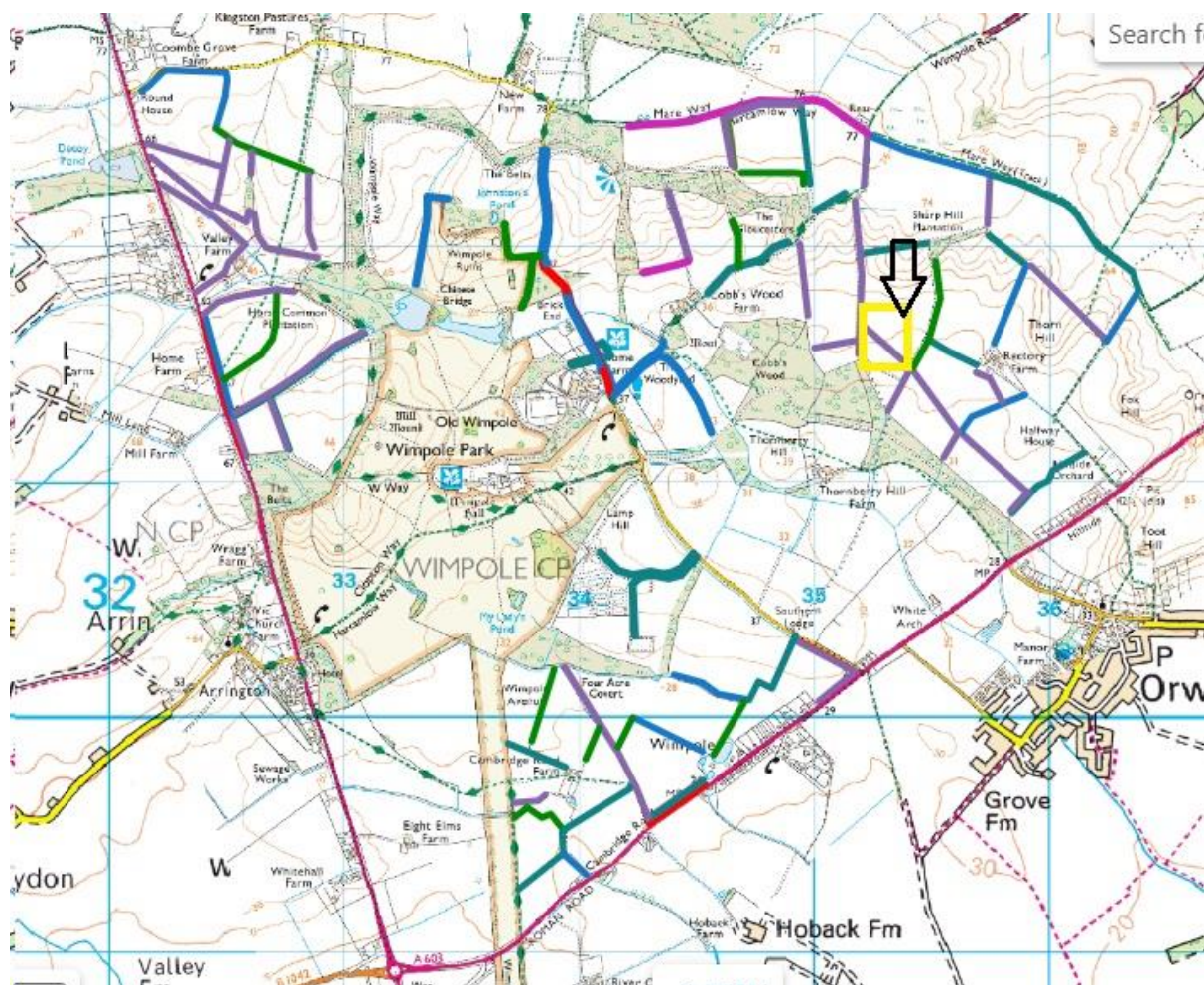


Figure 63. Map that visualises the hedgerow data in Figure 61 (Hassall 2025)

The length of hedgerow shown as a purple line and designated marked by a yellow square and black arrow on the hedgerow maintenance plan is an ideal example of a hedgerow field boundary with particularly high biodiversity value. This ‘mini-shaw’⁴ (Figure 64) and the other boundary hedges designated in purple in the adjacent fields were identified by Hassall during a site visit as ‘beautiful’ exemplars of healthy hedgerows on the Wimpole estate and mirror those at Holkham.

⁴ A shaw is a strip of woodland and mature trees usually between five and fifteen metres wide, commonly acting as a field boundary. It can be considered a ‘large-scale hedgerow’ (Wilson 2021; Kent Downs National Landscape 2018).



Figure 64. Large, healthy hedge or 'mini-shaw' marked in yellow box on map in Figure 62 (author's photo)



Figure 65. Hedgerow on tenanted farmland at Osterley (author's photo)

As the other National Trust properties consulted only hold tenanted farmland, they are a somewhat more complicated picture as changes to farming practices require mutual agreement. Osterley Park's tenant farmer retains a traditional, agrochemical farming operation resulting in overmanaged and degraded hedgerows (Figure 65) across the arable estate. Furthermore, discussions on hedgerow maintenance across other parts of the Osterley estate touched on issues related to staffing in terms of achieving environmental objectives. However, they have undertaken a considerable amount of hedgerow planting to increase the overall coverage across the rest of the estate:

Graham: '...you had mentioned the hedgerow restoration...could you expand a little..?'

Eddy: '...we've put miles and miles of hedges [in], [including] on one of our bridleways, which

goes across the estate called Osterley Lane...probably, five or six hundred metres of new hedging went in. And that was all English native...and that's...trimmed once a year by contractors. Theoretically, we'd rather do the cutting, a scheme where we did one side, one year, one side another year, the top another year, but just the way it works with our contractors...we're without a lead ranger at the moment so a lot of these things we would do in an ideal world, but actually, in the real world things happen differently' (Eddy 2023, 803-804).

Both the Calke Abbey and Hardwick Hall estates have undertaken a significant amount of hedgerow construction across their respective estates, with tens of thousands of hedgerow trees planted in recent years. However, these have largely been part of more substantial habitat creation projects which have involved the reversion of previously tenanted arable farmland to more natural habitats. Consequently, those examples of hedge creation will be considered within the context of their wider landscape recovery schemes which will be considered in the following chapter.

Site	Tenanted or in-hand	Regenerative Strategies	Receipt of agri- environment funding?
<i>Holkham (Ind)</i>	Both	Reduced tillage, crop rotations, herbal leys, integrated livestock, reduced inputs, field margins, hedgerow restoration	Yes
<i>Hatfield (Ind)</i>	In-hand	Crop rotations, herbal leys, integrated livestock, reduced inputs, field margins, hedgerow restoration	Yes
<i>Mapperton (Ind)</i>	Tenanted	Crop rotations, herbal leys, integrated livestock, field margins, hedgerow restoration	Not Mentioned
<i>Wimpole (NT)</i>	In-hand	Organic-certified, crop rotations, herbal leys, integrated livestock, zero inputs, field margins, hedgerow restoration	Yes
<i>Osterley (NT)</i>	Tenanted	Hedgerow restoration on non-tenanted estate only	Not mentioned

Table 3. Review of case study sites mentioned in Chapter 4.2. Included are the regenerative strategies being undertaken in either tenanted or in-hand farming contexts and whether funding is received through public agri-environment schemes.

As with the developments in parkland management systems which have moved away from aesthetics of 'tidiness' that became entrenched during the twentieth century, farming landscapes have undergone a corresponding renegotiation in purpose and significance. Moreover, to a lesser degree, but mirroring the evolutions in the visual experience of parkland landscapes, there has been an adjustment in the management of hedgerows for a correspondingly 'untidy' appearance through reduced trimming cycles. However, the most

substantial development in these farming landscapes has been a renegotiation of productivity and landscape significance in farming contexts. The pursuit of increased agricultural productivity through intensification has been a defining feature of in-hand and tenanted estate farming since the age of early modern agricultural improvers, leading to disastrous ecological effects following the rise of mechanised agrochemical monoculture farming in the twentieth century. Therefore, the renegotiation of productivity in these farming landscapes reflects a contestation of a landscape philosophy which has been part of the English countryside, and particularly its rural estates, for centuries. As with renegotiations in parkland significance, this has demanded a shift towards a fluid understanding of landscape which reacts to the needs of its wider socio-ecological contexts (Waterton 2018, 95). Bound up within this is the contemporary application of pre-chemical historic practices in modern contexts to address challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. What landowners and agriculturalists during the era of improvements regarded as methods of intensification and output maximisation, modern land managers and farmers have returned to as nature-based sustainability solutions central to contemporary regenerative agriculture. As highlighted previously, according to Holkham's Conservation Director, Jake Fiennes, 'regenerative agriculture is not a new form of agriculture, it is about learning from the past and implementing for the future' (British Ecological Society 2025, 4). Indeed, Claire Kingston (Mapperton) made a similar remark while discussing this reintegration of historic farming strategies at Mapperton: '[regenerative] farming is going back to traditional methods, but in a more sort of technical and obviously modern way, it's not dog and stick at all' (Kingston 2025, 754). As a result, there are potential opportunities to position these practical applications within forward-looking heritage strands and museologies. In this context, historic agricultural processes constitute the use of past ways being, implemented to address critical contemporary issues for more sustainable futures (Harrison *et al.* 2020a; Borelli & Davis 2012, 34; Davis 2011, 5).

According to Sue Penlington, Holkham has no intention of moving away from their role as an important agricultural estate as it has been for centuries (Penlington 2024, 717). As such, they have worked to address contemporary environmental issues with the end goal of retaining output levels consistent with conventional agrochemical farming practices but delivered through regenerative principles. As discussed above, this has required assessing productivity over a multi-year crop rotation cycle rather than year-on-year comparisons. Hence, rather than suggesting that Holkham's regenerative farming strategies are evidence of contemporary deintensification, they are leading the charge in renegotiating the idea of intensive farming as a whole in order to balance environmental issues while remaining a key food producer. More

importantly, this has demanded a change in the value and significance of these landscapes themselves. Previously regarded as purely food producing landscapes for which the maximisation of output was ultimately the most important end, they are being actively reinterpreted. Far from merely being a ‘backdrop to human activities’ centred around agricultural yields (Ingold 1993, 152), they are becoming part of a wider, relational matrix in the estate landscape where human stewardship and more-than-human ecological agencies are co-constitutive (Huggan 2026, 339).

Mirroring the revision of landscape significance in historic parklands which are now valued as critical wildlife supporting habitats alongside their historical, pastoral, and recreational significance, these agricultural landscapes beyond the park have become similarly multi-faceted, balancing ‘food production with biodiversity’ (Penlington 2024, 718). Nevertheless, while Holkham Estate has ‘no appetite to reduce [their] farming operation’ (Penlington 2024, 717), many other estates across the country have in fact begun to do so, abandoning agricultural landscapes altogether to give them back to nature. These nature recovery projects are increasingly common across English estates, which have the advantage of offering the necessary scale of landscape, and ‘rewilding’ in particular has captured the imagination of estate owners and the public at large, popularised in part by West Sussex’s now-famous Knepp estate. Though the construction of hedgerows and field margins discussed above are a form of habitat creation, the following chapter will shed light on these larger landscape recovery projects which carry significant implications about the future of estate landscapes in England and beyond.

Chapter 5. A Beaver and a Bison: Habitat Creation and Rewilding



Figure 66. Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape* (1794) depicting parkland in the naturalistic style popularised by Brown and his contemporaries which Knight and other members of the Picturesque movement found 'flat, and insipid' (Knight 1794; Gilpin, 1792, 57)



Figure 67. Comparative image from *The Landscape* showing an improved, Picturesque parkland design which appealed to a more rugged and wild aesthetic than the naturalistic yet ordered Brownian landscapes depicted in Figure 65 (Knight 1794)

‘Inspired by estates such as Knepp Castle in Sussex and Alladale in Scotland, owners are increasingly beguiled by rewilding...they would rather look out onto a wild-flower meadow than a manicured lawn of no biodiversity interest’

Clive Aslet, *The Story of the Country House* (2021, 216)

The previous chapter examined how modifying farming and land management systems within estate landscapes has boosted natural capital and biodiversity through the reduced ‘tidying up’ of historic parkland and the integration of regenerative farming methods. However, these landscapes are being further transformed through the creation of wildlife-supporting habitats. In England, as the present chapter will show, this is often through the reversion of arable farmland through processes of land abandonment followed by natural regrowth and planting schemes. Leading from the creation of hedgerows or field margins discussed in the previous chapter, these environmental restoration programmes which run along a spectrum of spatial scales are rapidly being integrated into large estates across the United Kingdom. ‘Rewilding’ projects in particular have captivated the public and received substantial attention in the media (BBC News 2025; The Guardian 2025; Weller 2025). Of these, perhaps the most well-known example in England is the 3,500-acre former arable and dairy farm at the Knepp estate. Located in West Sussex, the estate has undergone a complete transformation of its agricultural landscape, spearheaded by its owners, husband-and-wife team, Sir Charles Burrell and Isabella Tree, the process of which has been addressed in detail in the popular book, *Wilding* (Tree 2018).

While the large-scale rewilding projects like that at Knepp or the scheme at Somerleyton Estate in Suffolk have captured public imagination, habitat creation at smaller scales remains an effective way of generating natural capital while circumventing the space and species requirements of more ‘wild’ landscapes which require more substantial tracts of land and the reintroduction of multiple species of large grazing mammals. Nevertheless, these smaller-scale reversions and habitat creation projects such as estate parkland extensions and mixed woodland and grassland creation schemes are a similar shift in both the visual experience and key priorities of land in estate contexts. Together, these various habitat creation projects are remaking the landscapes of estates and further strengthen the ecological role of these sites beyond the renegotiations in park and farmland management. Moreover, this chapter will analyse the significance of the ‘Knepp model’ of rewilding as a commercial venture and its implications for the economic sustainability and appeal to cultural relevance of private estates moving forward. However, before discussing these two interlinked approaches to the regeneration of the UK’s degraded natural environment and their integration into England’s

historic estate landscapes, a brief exploration into relevant discrepancies between them will provide context as to how and why they have been presented separately in this research.

Habitat Creation or Rewilding?

In pursuing a typological distinction between both terms, it can be argued that all rewilding is in essence habitat creation, but that not all habitat creation can be considered *rewilding*.

Svenning (2020) notes this division, highlighting the fact that creation or restoration, unlike rewilding, requires chronic human intervention, whereas rewilded areas are, or should endeavour to be, entirely self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency subsequently allows for geographical expansion of these rewilded areas and improves long-term ecological resilience. As this deeper inquiry between the two will show, the requisite self-sufficiency in rewilded areas is relatively unachievable in a UK context due to a critical lack of keystone predator species and related issues of scale. However, alternate interpretations of ‘rewilding’ in European contexts allow for the identification of conservation projects that can be defined as rewilding as opposed to habitat creation in this work. To make this distinction clear, a short review of the rewilding movement and its diverse interpretations will provide context for its implementations at estates consulted within this research as well as those beyond it.

American conservationist and founder of the Rewilding Institute, David Foreman, coined the term ‘rewilding’ in the late 1980s and since then it has developed into a global phenomenon with a wide array of definitions with notable differences between North American and European interpretations (Locquet & Carver, 2022, 22; Miles 2019). Associated with the Rewilding Institute, the Wildlands Network (originally Wildlands Project), was founded in 1991 by conservation biologist, Dr. Michael Soulé and David Foreman to assist in delivering rewilding projects across North America. For Foreman, his peers and successors, rewilding refers to a ‘comprehensive, often large-scale, conservation effort focused on restoring sustainable biodiversity and ecosystem health by protecting core wild/wilderness areas, providing connectivity between such areas, and protecting or reintroducing apex predators and highly interactive species (keystone species),’ or the short-hand: ‘cores, corridors, and carnivores’ (Rewilding Institute n.d.). Within this model, the absence of ‘direct anthropogenic disturbance’ is often seen as critical, though these spaces may serve purposes of passing human recreation (Carruthers-Jones *et al.* 2022, 81). This ‘fortress conservation’ model relies on protected areas of wilderness in which human influence is understood to be minimal or absent entirely (Rai *et al.* 2021; Pettorelli *et al.* 2018).

When discussing the concept of rewilding with Jon Lewney, Calke Abbey’s Countryside Manager, he echoed this interpretation:

Lewney: ‘...rewilding to me means something on a huge scale, you know, Cairngorms style, take a whole landscape. You could do [it] with the Peak District, if you could get rid of the population. That kind of massive, hundreds of square miles, maybe the National Forest, two hundred square miles...then all of a sudden you can look at having a wild deer population that's controlled by a predator population, and you've got the linkages’ (Rasen & Lewney 2023, 408).

Within this school of thought, the presence of apex predators and the necessary scale to accommodate them are integral to the idea of a wild and self-sustaining ecosystem. The centrality of these keystone predator species was strengthened by Soulé and Noss’s highly influential Wildlands Project vision statement, *Rewilding Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation* (1998), in which they assert that discomfort and timidity around the reintroduction of carnivore populations is inexcusable and a betrayal of the natural environment (Soulé and Noss 1998, 25).

Since the creation of the term ‘rewilding’, alternative meanings have developed, particularly in relation to their geographical contexts. In a review of changing interpretations since its inception, Jørgensen (2014) recognised six key types, observing a particular dichotomy between North American and European implementations with a reduced emphasis on predator reintroduction and Pleistocene ecology in Europe. In contrast to Foreman’s North American tradition, European models offer a more flexible and adaptable definition as a result of a more ‘crowded and intensely cultural European Landscape’ which is prohibitive of rewilding projects at North American scales, inviting less ‘radical’ ecosystem recovery strategies (Mikołajczak *et al.* 2022, 1436). In contrast to the North American, ‘cores, corridors and carnivores’ model, the European eco-charity, Rewilding Europe defines rewilding as ‘letting nature take care of itself, enabling natural processes to shape land and sea, repair damaged ecosystems and restore degraded landscapes’ (Rewilding Europe n.d.). Rewilding Britain maintains this point-of-view, interpreting it as ‘the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature can take care of itself. Rewilding seeks to reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species, allowing them to shape the landscape and the habitats within’ (Rewilding Britain 2025b).

Unlike continental Europe which has retained an albeit substantially reduced apex predator population including wolves, bears, and lynx, they have been entirely removed from the United Kingdom. Not only has this further damaged the environmental equilibrium, but it has created a more contentious debate around the reintroduction of top predator populations such as the

Eurasian wolf or lynx, though some conservation groups such as Rewilding Britain advocate for their return (Snowdon 2023; Baynes 2019; Ford n.d.; Wright n.d.). In Britain, with the lack of these keystone predator species, discomfort around their reintroduction, and issues of landscape scale compared to North America, rewilding practices have demanded a renegotiation of rewilding as a conservation strategy. Following the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, potentially dangerous animals such as wolves or wild boar are banned from reintroduction into free-roaming and unconfined spaces (Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976). As a substitute, domesticated or semi-domesticated heritage breeds, including Tamworth pigs and Exmoor ponies, are often incorporated into rewilded areas to fulfil similar ecological purposes (Rewilding Britain 2025c; Rewilding Britain 2025d). Furthermore, in contrast to continental Europe, ‘land abandonment’ in the UK is rarely unintentional and typically the result of large landowners setting aside particular parcels of land for low or no-management strategies (Thomas 2022, 517). This has led to a distinct rewilding model in the UK characterised by agricultural land abandonment with the introduction of keystone species of herbivores, including, but not limited to, heritage breeds of cattle, ponies, pigs, or beavers. Thomas (2022) refers to this model, which is particularly common in England, as a ‘domesticated’ form of rewilding and characterises the schemes pursued by Knepp, Somerleyton and other estates with large enough landholdings and the resources to undertake them. As discussed above, Dutch ecologist Frans Vera’s ‘wood-pasture hypothesis’ argues that much of lowland Western Europe was dominated by a ‘park-like’ landscape of mixed woodland densities in which the growth of trees and shrubs were managed by large grazing mammals (Vera 2000, 376). Not only has this theory contributed to the recognition of wood-pasture habitats in estate parkland as ecologically important but has directly informed this model of ‘domesticated’ rewilding undertaken at Knepp estate (Tree 2018). Further to discussions of the concept with Lewney, rewilding was broached again with Andy Eddy, Head Gardener at Osterley Park who expressed a similar opinion to Lewney regarding the necessary size for such rewilding projects, but noted the value of the term for engaging with a British public that is generally starved of a deeper relationship with the natural environment:

Eddy: ‘...I hate to use the word rewilding schemes...what’s your view of rewilding? I’m asking you a question now.’

Graham: [Laughs]. ‘...it does seem to be a word that’s kind of...run away with itself a little bit.’

Eddy: ‘Lots of people jumping on the bandwagon...I don’t think most of the public realize that to do it on a big enough scale it needs to be, you know, you can’t rewild, a fifty-acre place. It’s got to be hundreds of acres, hasn’t it?’

Graham: ‘Yeah...it has become a bit of this kind of catch-all I think.... I [noticed]...a small little patch of grass...[in] one of the corners...of [a church yard] ...and they had...a sort of ten square metre patch...’

Eddy: ‘...and they were rewilding’ [laughs].

Graham: [Laughs]. ‘...yeah, they had blocked it off and put a little sign about rewilding’.

Eddy: ‘But it has become such a well-known phrase now that it’s a shortcut to people understanding what you’re trying to do, I guess, isn’t it? The point is, I mean, I’ve lived and worked outside all my life. And so half of the time, I’m too close to the subject to see what the wider public might see, really’ (Eddy 2023, 814-815).

Eddy’s assessment that the term ‘rewilding’ can be a useful shorthand to engage and inform the lay public about environmental initiatives largely conforms to the European and British models which are more flexible and intent-focused than the North American model that unflinchingly requires its ‘cores, corridors and carnivores’. As a consequence of this more ‘domesticated’ system of rewilding in Britain, when discussing the creation of ‘wild’ landscapes in this research, it is a relevant clarification to acknowledge their limitations in England through the roles that humans play in maintaining these rewilded areas. However, in pursuit of a functional distinction between *rewilding* and *habitat creation* as terms used in reference to the present case studies, it is this ‘domesticated’ model, i.e., passive or active land abandonment with species reintroduction informed by Rewilding Britain’s adaptive conceptual framework that the present work relies on. Therefore, while many habitat creation projects, like those included in this work, may utilise domesticated stock for grazing which functionally mimics the ecological effects of wild or semi-domesticated herbivores which conform to Vera’s wood-pasture hypothesis that has inspired rewilding projects such as Knepp, the lack of intentional species inclusion excludes them from the application of the term *rewilding*.

Having briefly surveyed rewilding as an ecological concept with its array of interpretative and geo-politically defined models, followed by an assessment and explanation of how the terms rewilding and habitat creation are used in this work, an analysis of both within the present case studies will be undertaken. Examples of habitat creation will be considered first, followed by a short, but necessary inquiry into the rewilding movement with an investigation into how it has

transformed the landscape of the Mapperton estate. Though a small sample of habitat creation projects as defined above differ from the model, the majority of these schemes are delivered through the reversion of formerly arable land. As this reversal process also informs the basis of the estate-based rewilding model in England, the transformation of these estate landscapes in either context are a corresponding and significant shift in the visual experience and priorities in land use. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that while this typology has been created for use in the present work, in practice, the lines of distinction between them are less defined.

Furthermore, as these projects develop, a particular case of habitat creation may eventually transition into something more substantial that may at some point in the future be considered rewilding.

5.1 Habitat Creation

There are a multitude of habitat types for which environmental rehabilitation is now supported by government funding, including, but not limited to, coastal and intertidal habitats, inland wetland environments including marsh, swamp and fenland areas, moorland and tracts of peat-rich bog, waterways such as lakes, ponds, rivers or streams of various types and geological or sedimentary habitats (Defra 2025b). However, as outlined in the methodology, this work has focused on the arable farm and parkland environments common among historic estates in lowland England for reasons of research scope and heritage significance. Therefore, the habitat creation projects considered in this section have been carried out within those landscape contexts. Moreover, this research is interested in the effect that this growing trend has on transforming estate farmland into more ‘natural’ landscapes which seek to support a broader range of native biodiversity within a wider, interconnected estate landscape. The projects featured here are ordered by ownership (National Trust or independent), rather than habitat type due to the nature in which these projects are carried out. In contrast to the more diverse and site-specific approaches to nature recovery at independent sites, habitat creation projects occurring at landed estates under the care of the National Trust are particularly uniform in approach with generally consistent methodologies across the properties which have undertaken such work. Consequently, these schemes are presented together, followed by those sites in independent ownership. Finally, it is a necessary clarification that the examples which follow are a selection, rather than an exhaustive list of the habitat and ecosystem recovery works which have been implemented on the estates in this research.

The National Trust

As the nation's largest private landowner including over 1,300 tenant farms (Royal Oak 2025; National Trust 2021c), the National Trust has an incredibly diverse portfolio of landscapes that fall under its care. As such, their habitat creation efforts run the gamut both in terms of environmental context and scale. Indeed, both the Lake District's *Wild Ennerdale* (4,800 ha/11,861 acres) and North Devon's *Wild Exmoor* (1,821 ha/4,499 acres), two of England's largest rewilding projects, are being delivered by or in partnership with the Trust (Rewilding Britain 2025e; 2025f). While landscape recovery and habitat creation projects such as these are vital to both the Trust's mission as well as the United Kingdom's efforts to ameliorate issues related to climate change and biodiversity loss, they fall outside the remit of this work for the reasons of scope and research significance given previously. Hence, the habitat creation projects undertaken by the Trust and analysed here are primarily wood-pasture creation schemes consistent with lowland estate parkland ecology.

It is now four decades since the Trust acquired Calke Abbey with its vision of managing and championing a historic parkland for its environmental significance. Since then, a more comprehensive and cohesive means of generating and retaining existing natural capital within these estate landscapes has developed. In 2020 the National Trust committed itself to planting twenty million trees by 2030 to boost the UK's climate change resilience and repair the degradation of natural spaces (PA Media 202). Along with the hedgerow planting schemes discussed previously that contribute to meeting these targets, larger planting schemes have been pursued to increase habitat connectivity and local biodiversity within estate boundaries with ecological linkages into regional and national networks (National Trust 2025b).

Demonstrated above, rewilding in England is typically undertaken through agricultural land abandonment followed by the intentional inclusion of key species of grazing mammals. While not defined as rewilding either in this research or by the National Trust, habitat creation at Trust-owned estates often follows a similar model of arable reversion to wood-pasture. Outlined in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, wood-pasture and parkland is characterised by open-grown trees within a grassland habitat, however, it can also include areas of closed canopy woodland as part of the wider habitat matrix (JNCC 2011). Consequently, the wood-pasture creation projects shown here reflect a mix of open and closed woodland habitats with the integration of domesticated farming stock. Of the five Trust-owned sites consulted for this work, three (Calke Abbey, Hardwick Hall, Wimpole Hall) have undertaken habitat creation projects as defined here. The other two (Beningbrough Hall, Osterley Park) have been unable to engage with habitat creation as a consequence of their property boundaries and farming tenancies –

Beningbrough's parkland is entirely pastoral and organic-certified grazed wood-pasture and Osterley's arable tenant is currently uninterested in moving into agri-environmental schemes (Buffey 2023; Eddy 2023). Moreover, Osterley's location within urban London inhibits further acquisitions on the border of the estate, a method of nature rehabilitation which has been undertaken at other Trust locations in this research.

Over the last two decades, Calke Abbey has pursued a number of habitat creation schemes with the end goal of a deeply interconnected, multi-habitat wood-pasture and parkland mosaic with substantial linkages to its wider geography. Hence, along with the other Trust properties presented here, their arable reversion and habitat creation projects are normally undertaken on an individual field or parcel basis, however, Calke's internal landscape strategies are holistic and consider the estate's ecology in its entirety. During on-site research at Calke, Jon Lewney explained this long-term vision for the estate's natural environment:

Lewney: 'The whole plan for Calke estate is that it will be wood-pasture parkland. For us that means that there'll be areas of closed canopy woodland forest – high forest and then there'll be areas of scrub, open-grazed areas, meadows...people often think of wood-pasture as trees in fields, but for us it's not that, it's about having a mixture of habitats that create this open structure that you see in wood-pasture and a lot more scrub than people possibly imagine' (Lewney 2024, 441).

As such, in an effort to increase the extent of wood-pasture and parkland at Calke, the National Trust has worked to establish a variety of specific habitats across its boundaries. One of the first projects (Figures 68, 69) taken on by the Trust at Calke was during Bill Cove's tenure as Countryside Manager between 2005 and 2007:

Cove: 'Our biggest tenant farmer, Joe, he went into one of the early Countryside Stewardship schemes...about 280 acres...for arable reversion to grass with parkland trees in it. Now, this was something obviously that the Trust was supporting him with in terms of getting all the paperwork because he was getting to an age where you know, "why am I farming all this land..."



Figure 69. Photo from within Calke Park in c.2007 showing agrochemical conventional farming occurring immediately adjacent to the SSSI parkland boundary (Cove 2024b)



Figure 68. Previously arable field from Figure 69 which is now under a governmental agri-environment-funded grazed wood-pasture scheme (author's photo)

...I'm getting towards sixty'...you know, "do I want to be doing this over the next ten, fifteen years or whatever, or do I want to have an easier life?" He didn't have any succession at the time. So it was like, "well hold on a minute, they're going to pay me X amount to do the work and X amount for the next ten years, let's do it". So not only did he go from being intensively arable right on our SSSI [parkland] boundary, he went to organic grassland with trees, and of course, with the Trust, they were like, "yes please, let's do it".... So I've got pictures of combines up that wall side [and] sprayers going up that wall side within four metres of a SSSI this side of the wall. So for the Trust, the fact that one of our tenants wanted to do that was stunning. And we of course, were in a Countryside Stewardship scheme anyway, for the park, because we were a SSSI and a National Nature Reserve, and we'd gone into a scheme for that. And then basically, Joe was the forerunner of all the other schemes that went on across the estate, because most of it now is in, apart from the intensive dairy farms, they're all in some sort of or have been in some sort of a stewardship scheme' (Cove 2024a, 510).

Since then, other tenant farmers at Calke who have been interested in minimising their labour demands have worked with the National Trust to create additional wood-pasture, woodland and grassland habitats such as the following sixteen-hectare arable field currently under reversion (Figure 70). In doing so, it aids in constructing the wildlife corridors critical to large-scale landscape ecologies:

Lewney: '...this was all oilseed rape last year, [then the tenant said], "I don't want to do that again this year. Can I give it back to the Trust?" ... And we've been looking at this for ages going, we'd like this to be something else other than oilseed rape. So the plan here, this barn here is absolutely full of barn owls every year, real great barn owl habitat. And the plan is to create a barn owl meadow that the barn owls can hunt so it'll have long tufty grass, wood-pasture, but also to link to Daniel Hays farm which is behind us and Long Alders to this new bit of plantation which is a National Forest plantation that we don't own.

Graham: '...about how many trees are you looking for this planting scheme?'

Lewney: ‘There’s sixteen hectares here. Probably four or five hectares of it would be woodland plantation, so...5,500, 6,000 [of that] and then the rest will be wood-pasture. These hedges will be beaten up with new hedgerows going in. So there’ll probably be...about 6,000 hedgerow trees’ (*Lewney* 2024, 451-452).



Figure 70. Sixteen-hectare field previously under arable due to be planted with mixed density woodland, wood-pasture and replanted hedgerows (author's photo)

This arable reversion scheme is one segment of a larger project with the National Forest that is in receipt of external funding from Toyota. As part of this outside investment, Lewney worked to negotiate the vision and interests of the company with the environmental objectives of the National Trust which prioritise native species for local biodiversity. Moreover, it will serve to improve outdoor access which is a fundamental part of the National Trust’s contemporary landscape strategies (National Trust 2025) and calls back to their founding mission:

Lewney: ‘...I think we're getting up towards around 15-20,000 trees once this is all done...[between] the hedges, the woodland and the wood-pasture.... It’s a big old block. It's gonna mostly be blossom because the National Forest have done a deal with Toyota and Toyota wanted to put in a Japanese blossom park. And I said, well, we can't really do that. But what we could do is put in native blossom trees that echo the Japanese blossom park. So the primary design would be around blossom trees. So that might be cherry, apple, pear. So I see the wood-pasture here being more of an orchard...and then a lot of hawthorn, blackthorn, those kind of early flowering species. The key thing for us

is that...we don't lose that habitat for the barn owls. It will also have public access [because] at the moment there's [none]. (Lewney 2024, 452-453).



Figure 71. Planted just before on-site research in January 2024, Casey's Plantation contains 10,000 native tree species including oak, hornbeam, cherry, and blackthorn (author's photo)

Casey's Plantation (Figure 71) is a five-hectare native woodland creation scheme planted in part by community volunteers at Calke between 2018 and 2019, funded through the National Forest's Changing Landscapes Scheme which offers 100% of the funding for planting and ten years of maintenance (Lewney 2024, 441; Forestry Commission 2023; National Trust n.d.k). Comparisons between aerial photographs of the area in 2007 (Figure 72) and 2025 (Figure 73) provide visual evidence of the contrast in habitat density and connectivity even at such small scales.



Figure 72. Arable fields at Casey's Plantation, highlighted in blue, in 2007 (Google Earth 2025a)



Figure 73. Casey's Plantation in 2025. Open wood-pasture is highlighted in yellow. Closed woodland in red, with a publicly accessible path visible through the interior of the closed woodland belt (Google Earth 2025b)

Several hundred metres west of Casey's Plantation is another wooded habitat creation project (Figure 74) of 8,000 native trees and shrubs which will provide further linkages across the estate



Figure 74. Block of 8,000 native woodland trees. This photo location correlates to the centre heatmap dot on Figure 9 at the junction of Heath Lane, looking east towards Casey's Plantation (author's photo)

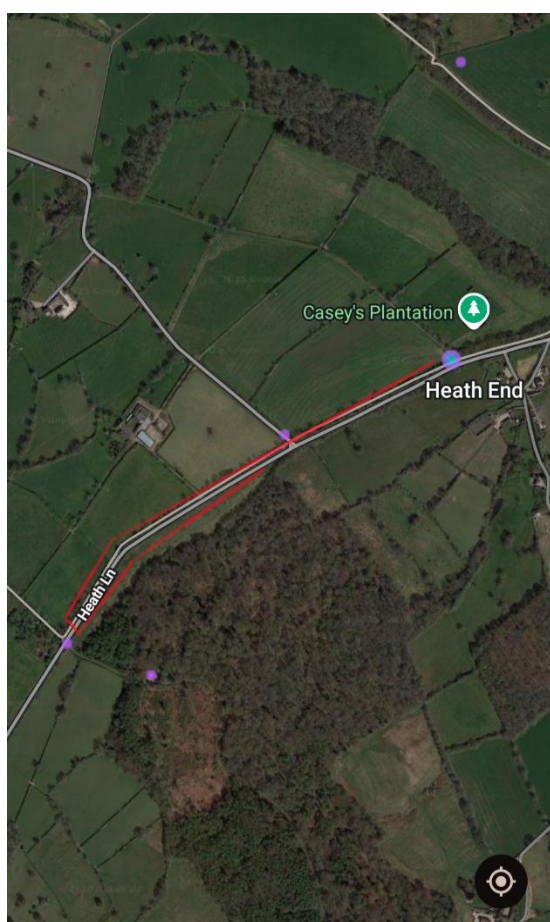


Figure 75. Map of the southern portion of Calke estate. The belt of land highlighted in red shows the area covered by the 8,000-count tree plantation with linkages created between existing and newly planted areas of mixed density woodland (Google Maps 2025a)

(Figure 75) by connecting a larger expanse of woodland to its south with other parcels of adjacent woodland:

Lewney: 'This is about 8,000 trees in this block [and] our idea with these schemes is that we link existing woodlands together, that's the whole plan. Part of that is about us trying to create corridors for wildlife. But part of it is also about trying to screen parts of the estate. So, we know that this area of the estate potentially will have some kind of glamping, camping offer in it in the future. So putting some trees in or give us a screen for that and make it a nicer experience for the people who are staying because they'll be screened from the road, and vice versa from the road you won't be able to see into a glamping camping site' (Lewney 2024, 439-440).

Furthermore, beyond the emphasis on creating critical habitats and wildlife corridors across the estate, the Trust has also undertaken important

species reintroduction at Calke to further enhance native biodiversity. In conjunction with the People's Trust for Endangered Wild Species and the National Forest, the National Trust reintroduced hazel dormice to the estate in 2023, whose species population has declined 51% since 2000 (National Trust 2023).

As with Calke, the conservation and restoration work at Hardwick Hall is made up of individual habitat creation projects which work together to improve the biodiversity value of the estate as a whole. While Calke's ecology has benefitted from its spirit-of-place as the 'un-stately stately home' for decades, Hardwick has recently established a twenty-five-year vision that aims to create a 'wilder Hardwick' (Sadler 2025, 546). Beyond changes to parkland management surveyed in Chapter 4, they have begun a number of habitat creation projects to advance the Trust's environmental objectives through tree planting and arable reversion schemes. In early 2020, Hardwick negotiated with one of their tenant farmers to expand the extent of wood-pasture within the park boundary, replacing 148 hectares (Figures 76 and 77) of previously arable fields with a species-rich mix of grass and native trees (Sadler 2025, 554; Smith 2020). Though not as historically complete as the parkland restoration work undertaken at Burton Constable, Hardwick has made use of historic maps to inform contemporary environmental regeneration projects within the parkland to build up its historic authenticity alongside its natural capital:

Graham: '...with a place like Calke Abbey...the "un-stately stately home" ...they've been quite free to let things go a bit rough and wild. So...with Hardwick Hall, where obviously so much of the focus is on that hall, and there's [historically] been a little bit more of that interest in a sharp presentation, what's that been like for you guys then working between that and trying to balance that [with environmental goals]? Is it...involving then kind of reconceptualizing Hardwick as a destination as well?'

Sadler: 'Yeah. I mean...we've looked at maps...over the hundreds of years and seen what it was like tree cover wise and if it was more...you know, wilder, if you like [and] what species were around at the time. So we sort of got this vision now – aspirations of what we'd like to look at, whether that's extra tree cover, non-grazing of areas, or more wetland creation. So we're just sort of at a point [where] we've sort of got all these brilliant ideas now, [so we are] taking a step back and involving farm tenants about how we can reach some of those goals within their schemes that they're in at the moment and when opportunities arise for them to change a scheme that might benefit nature friendly farming more...' (Sadler 2025, 546-547).

Sadler continued, shedding light on how despite the architectural significance of the hall, Hardwick Park is unaffiliated with any well-known landscape designer which eases possible restrictions on nature-based restoration work:



Figure 76. 148-hectare wood-pasture creation scheme before reversion while under active arable farming in 2009 (Google Maps 2025b)

Sadler: ‘So areas that were notably absent, of trees or more open, we’re sort of sticking to those views...[and]...because it’s not a parkland designed by Capability Brown or anybody, there [are] opportunities for us to make it wilder... [and] we’re trying to work with our tenants, particularly the arable reversion that’s happened recently, about how to reduce numbers of cattle to help...to [encourage] wildflowers to flourish and not [overgraze it]’ (Sadler 2025, 547-548).

Sadler’s discussion on maintaining this new area of wood-pasture highlights the significance of grazing even outside of the scope of ‘rewilding’. As both historic and contemporary landscapes, the ecological significance of these open areas of parkland lies not only in the tree-pasture ratio but the diversity of its meadow flora. Consequently, while not rewilding, this relationship between grazing and pasture highlights the biodiversity value of these historically grazed parklands and parallels can be drawn between such landscapes and their ‘rewilded’ counterparts.



Figure 77. 148-hectare wood-pasture creation in Hardwick Park (author's photo)

Beyond restoration projects within the parkland, Hardwick have secured additional parcels of land as a means of extending existing habitats and improving connectivity across the estate and its surrounding geography. In 2025, the author spoke with Hardwick's Lead Ranger, Steve Sadler, to review these projects which had previously been discussed during a site visit consultation in 2023 as well as further habitat creation work which has been undertaken since then:

Graham: '[There was a] ...fourteen-acre field (Figure 78)...purchased in 2022... [that] had been at that time outlined for woodland regeneration?'

Sadler: 'Yeah, so that's been planted with 800 native trees...it was a field that came up for auction. 'It was particularly used for maize growing, but obviously it borders our existing land and a woodland. So, we purchased that to extend the woodland...and then it was ploughed and then seeded with grassland mix...'

Graham: 'Okay, so [rather than] a tenanted farm that had come back in hand, that was actually a purchase of an external parcel of land?'

Sadler: 'Yes' (Sadler 2025, 555).



Figure 78. 14-acre field recently under arable reversion to woodland to improve habitat connectivity on the estate (author's photo)

Shortly before on-site research at Hardwick was carried out in 2023, another parcel of land was purchased at auction by the Trust and has since been turned over to a more diverse habitat mosaic while providing opportunities for community engagement through volunteering:

Graham: ‘...I saw some information [on the website] about a Dovedale Farm tree planting project?’

Sadler: ‘Yeah. So...between the main car park and Lady Spencer’s [wood].... In September 2022...that land, sixty acres, came up for auction. So it’s...pasture, a farmhouse and a woodland. So Dovedale Farm connects right onto Dovedale Wood SSSI. So we purchased that, and it’s been a bit of a slow process, but...12,000 trees are now planted on that site, and that’s now woodland creation, wood-pasture [and] orchard.’

Graham: ‘I did also see mentioned...a community orchard and wildflower meadow...is that a separate [project or part of the Dovedale Farm project?]’

Sadler: ‘Yeah, so the orchard is part of that [Dovedale Farm project] and the fruit trees were planted by the community. We’re establishing the wildflowers at the moment, it’s been a slow process, but that’s what it is’ (Sadler 2025, 557-558).

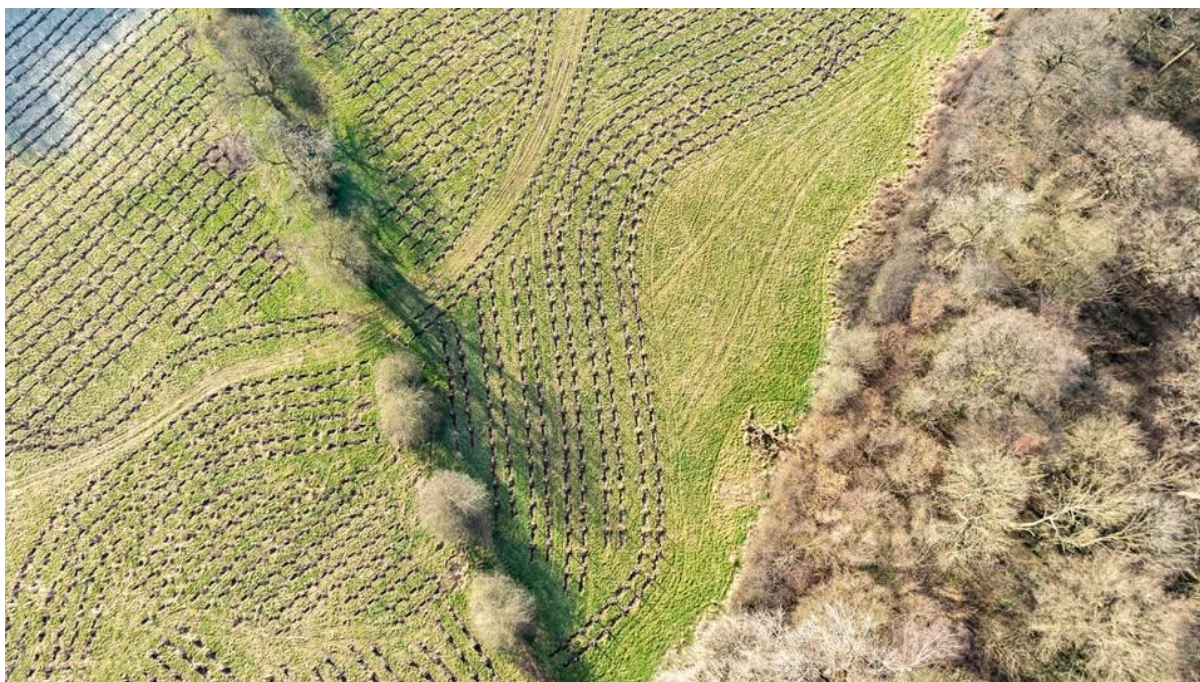


Figure 79. Aerial view of Dovedale Farm planting project (National Trust Images/Paul Harris n.d.)

This Dovedale Farm reversion project (Figure 79) has been delivered in partnership with Greenwood Community Forest, Nottinghamshire. One of fifteen in England, these Community Forests are grassroots initiatives in partnership between local councils, landowners and national government, highlighted in the 25-Year Plan for the Environment as playing a ‘key role in shaping woodland creation and nature recovery policy’ (Community Forests n.d.). Through this environmental regeneration they aim to improve the health and wellbeing of England’s population through better access to healthier natural environments (Greenwood n.d.)

At Wimpole, a vision for the estate consistent with that developed for Hardwick and Calke aims to expand the density of natural habitats and biodiversity. As the only National Trust estate with in-hand arable farming, they have had opportunities to take on arable reversion schemes without needing to negotiate with tenant farmers. Conversations with David Hassall, Wimpole’s Farm and Countryside Manager, discussed similar habitat creation (Figure 80) projects on the Wimpole estate, but yielded insight into the internal financial challenges inherent in delivering these schemes:

Graham: ‘...wood-pasture and parkland...has now become such a critical high priority habitat, and so now you're getting these projects where you're having arable reversion to wood-pasture [and] parkland or the expansion of wood-pasture [in] parkland zones or tree planting schemes or...plantation schemes. Has any of that been undertaken at

Wimpole? Are there other things that are coming up that...the estate has its eye on to do in the future?’

Hassall: ‘Yeah, so [Wimpole has] a vision that does state that we're looking to do more in the future. In the last few years, we've done about 130 hectares of it. So that's thirty hectares of woodland, about fifty agroforestry, and then fifty wood-pasture creation. And none of those are within the boundaries of what we call the registered parkland. They're all in the wider estate [so] you don't have huge amounts of scope to mess with the actual boundaries. There's three fields within there that are still under arable and restoration of those is on our priority list as something to get done...the capital outlay is not to be underestimated on something like that, though. That is not a cheap thing to do. You know, you'll get long term payment grants through [Countryside Stewardship], but there's no capital item for grass seed. And we looked at a couple of those fields, an estimate of grass seed costing £50,000, and that's before you've actually done the groundwork and the drilling and...the endless topping afterwards to keep it in decent condition, the redoing it if it goes wrong, etc., etc.’ (*Hassall 2024, 843-844*).



Figure 80. Pond Field, roughly 12 hectares of arable reversion to orchard, part of Wimpole Estate's wood-pasture creation (author's photo)

The economic factors which Hassall refers to in delivering environmental objectives are a significant consideration across both Trust-owned and independent estates and will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

These properties are merely three out of over a hundred historic country houses in the care of the National Trust, but they are indicative of the overarching strategy of habitat creation and

environmental rehabilitation on their estates – piecemeal arable reversion of predominately tenanted farms aided by agri-environmental government funding schemes to continuously improve habitat connectivity and biodiversity. Furthermore, these projects are being delivered under redefined vision strategies at the Trust which seek to create more diverse estate landscapes characterised by a ‘wilder’ aesthetic in contrast to latter twentieth-century standards. However, as with many of their other strategies, this habitat recovery work has not been without its detractors. One tenant farmer who the charity had asked to reduce livestock numbers by 85% to pursue landscape recovery claims the Trust ‘desecrates good working farms’ (Gatten 2025). Another former tenant of the Trust at Killerton Estate in Devon, whose arable farm was moved to a nature recovery scheme after the tenancy ended in 2022, called the ‘rewilded’ meadows ‘a bloody mess’ (du Toit 2025). At their core, arable reversion schemes are about land and priorities it should serve, and the Trust’s intentions for the landscapes under their remit are clear. With 250,000 hectares of nature-rich landscape creation to be carried out between 2025 and 2035, this strategy carries important implications on the future of land in England (National Trust 2025). While this hectareage covers their land holdings across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, it contributes a substantial proportion to the minimum 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats to be created or restored in England by 2042 through governmental policy, laid out in the government’s Statutory Environment Act targets (Defra 2025c). Moreover, as a key part of the National Trust’s land portfolio, these estates play an essential role in delivering on the national government’s environmental objectives. Beyond the Trust, the part that independent estates play in meeting these targets is upheld through the same significance of land ownership. However, as a result of the diversity of independent estates, approaches to habitat creation and nature recovery across their landscapes are less uniform.

Independent Properties

Two of the six independent sites in this research, Holkham and Hatfield, have undertaken arable reversion to habitat creation plans in line with those discussed above, though Lord Kerry also cited internal dialogues on potential opportunities for wood-pasture habitat creation at Bowood in the future (Kerry 2024, 288). Though not a form of arable reversion, the Harewood House Trust is transforming their parkland through various habitat and garden creation schemes for dual purposes of biodiversity and visitor appeal which will be examined in this section on account of scale and its parkland setting. The strategies presented here reflect the contrast between the National Trust whose properties operate as individual entities in adherence to a wider organisational directive and independent properties which are a more complex picture with

variations in an estate's configuration and project management strategies. For example, while Holkham has established itself as an industry leader in creating sustainable and biodiverse farming landscapes, the estate remains more explicitly dedicated to food production and as a result, they are more hesitant to turn large swathes of land completely over to nature. During a site-visit consultation, discussions about financing arable reversion projects with Holkham's Head of Sustainability, Sue Penlington, shed light on how the priorities of independent properties can create a more varied approach to sustainable estate management compared to the National Trust's top-down landscape policy directives which are more interested in returning farming landscapes to nature through arable reversion schemes:

Graham: '...so thinking about tenanted farmland...to have a tenant who is willing to put it over into a Countryside Stewardship scheme or habitat creation scheme, it has to make financial sense for them...so there's the role then the government plays in that...to support those aims financially, because [the farmer has to] have an income...'

Penlington: 'Yeah, yeah. And we've got an interesting example of a tenant who has asked to put his entire holding into agri-environment, mainly into wildflowers and wild bird seed mix. And he's asked permission and Lord Leicester said, "no, what you can do is put part of it into that, but you still need to grow food on some of this land".... And that's a really interesting one. It's a tenant who's of a certain age [and]...let's be honest, it's easier and more profitable to just grow flowers at the moment, but Lord Leicester is very adamant that it's a commercial farm. It's on good soil, part of it, so...it's not black and white. They've had an open conversation about...how it stacks up financially' (Penlington 2024, 679-680).

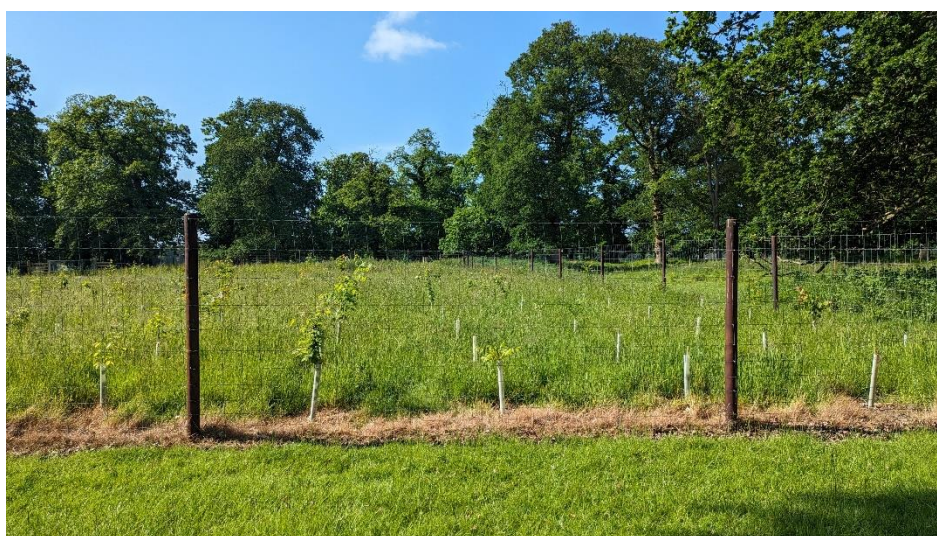


Figure 81. Native plantation in Holkham Park containing species such as hornbeam, beech, English oak and wild service tree (author's photo)

While Lord Leicester prefers that Holkham retains its primary role as an arable estate, habitat creation projects have been undertaken (discussed below) in addition to

other forms of environmental work within the parkland. While the Holm oaks for which Holkham is known are mediterranean in origin, brought to the estate by Thomas Coke (1754-1842), 1st Earl of Leicester on his return from the Grand Tour, they have prospered in recent years due to climate-related atmospheric warming (Penlington 2024, 653). However, native tree planting has taken place throughout areas of Holkham Park, including a small plantation (Figure 81) of several hundred trees to increase density within the parkland's perimeter woodland belt (Penlington 2024, 655).

Similar efforts to build up habitat density and biodiversity in designed parkland has also taken place at Harewood as part of a landscape redevelopment strategy, however, environmental conservation drives land management systems more broadly across its wider 4,000-acre estate registered under the Higher Level Stewardship scheme. Working within a shared vision between the privately owned Harewood Estate and the Harewood House Trust which manages the house and immediately surrounding grounds, parcels of land have already been subject to habitat creation within and without the park boundary, including a hundred hectares of wildflower meadow creation and over 40,000 native trees planted to establish amenity woodland, some replacing nineteenth and twentieth-century single species plantations after requisite felling work (Harewood 2025; Herbert 2024; RFS 2024). Within the parkland, the Harewood House Trust started a ten-year landscape restoration programme in 2023 to enhance Harewood Park's natural biodiversity and value as a space for public recreation and wellbeing. Kath Knight, Deputy CEO of Harewood House Trust remarked on how this strategy aims to complement and support the conservation efforts made in the wider landscape:

Knight: 'We also felt we could...build on the work that Harewood Estate is already doing around native conservation. The estate is in a Higher Level Countryside Stewardship scheme and you're likely to see massive changes in the landscape across the Harewood estate over the next few decades. Tens of thousands of trees planted, wildflower meadows, heritage livestock...[and] we've been looking at what we can do to work with the Estate on that.... So we also want to focus the development of our gardens and grounds on increasing biodiversity, native wildlife. We have retained a farm experience, which just consists of a few animals at the moment. But again, we want to change the focus of that to sort of native heritage breeds of livestock and possibly even have them released in the woodland areas. So it's much more of a natural experience...' (Knight 2023, 563)

Knight provided an overview of their parkland redevelopment plan during conversations with the author which has included the closure of their exotic bird garden, opened in 1970:

Knight: 'We're not going to return to a fixed point in time...but certainly recreating the feel of the pleasure grounds of the eighteenth century that extended between the house, the carpark and lakeside. So that's going to be opening up views across that that landscape, clearing the former bird garden...so working with Matthew Wilson, the garden designer, he's actually going to reinterpret those areas and design a new garden that is appropriate for the historic landscape. So part of the former bird garden...doesn't have much tree cover, so that's going to be more sort of extensive perennial planting...prairie type planting and lots of grasses very full, very thick, all year-round interest. And then as the bird garden area becomes more wooded, it is moving into more of that woodland garden feel. So...the aim is to retain as much planting that's there as possible...and the point of that is about creating more biodiversity within those garden spaces. We have had an ecology survey carried out for the project, and it rates all of the areas that I've mentioned as poor. So, we are starting from a very low base. So whatever we do is [helping] the ecology and the biodiversity of those areas. And then I suppose as part of this, we'll also look at how we can interpret that and educate our visitors about those changes and about what we're doing for biodiversity. And also looking at things like bird hides on the lake and woodland walks and just really developing...the biodiversity and native wildlife' (Knight 2023, 564-565).

The closure of Harewood's bird garden is emblematic of the reinterpretation of estate parklands and these changes hinge upon contemporary questions around the primary purposes of these landscapes in the twenty-first century. Though the decision to close the bird exhibit was also financial, Knight highlighted philosophical debates around it held by the board:

Knight: '...our board [was thinking] "what is Harewood for and what is our future?" We are an educational charity, and that's mainly around the history of the house...[so] the feeling was very much that actually it's, "should Harewood of the future be running a zoo?"' (Knight 2023, 563).

The shift away from a visitor attraction featuring exotic birds to one of native biodiversity carries further implications on the significance of historic parkland as a visitor destination in its own right, a growing trend which will be investigated more fully in the following chapter. Susan Hopkinson, director of the Burton Constable Foundation commented on this transition which

echoes Harewood's landscape redevelopment plan that underscores not only the ecological value, but the social value of environmentally-rehabilitated parkland landscapes:

Hopkinson: '...if you think of that immediate post war period when so many country houses were being demolished and being lost, people didn't think the parkland was an attraction, they felt like they had to import zebras and lions and create some sort of safari park. You know "why would people come just to look at a park? We've got to put something else in it to attract them to come"' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 318).

In addition to enhancing biodiversity within their historic parklands, independent estates have undertaken arable reversion projects to create habitats beyond the park pale. However, compared to the National Trust, relatively few independent estates featured in this research have taken on such projects – only Holkham and Hatfield estates. While government subsidies have helped deliver such work, concerns over the long-term reliability of agri-environmental funding have encouraged some to seek private financing to circumvent the perceived transience of governmental schemes, a point to be examined in more detail in Chapter 6. As an example, Holkham has partnered with a local jewellery designer to create a wildflower meadow (Figure 82) with a local connection that can be maintained in the long term while avoiding disruptions in national funding:

Penlington: 'This is called Monica's Meadow, and obviously it's overlooking the [National Nature Reserve] and so this was an arable field two years ago and it was happily growing crops, including potatoes and maize. You know, it's on a slope down onto the nature reserve, should we be growing food in it? Probably, not.... So this one, actually, Jake got some corporate funding. So there's a jewellery company, Monica Vinita...she's got a base at Longlands [Holkham's Home Farm]... And she sponsored us the equivalent profit of food production per year to make that into a wildflower meadow.... So...for her, it's about storytelling. It's about a feel-good factor. We haven't sold her carbon; we haven't sold her biodiversity. We've sold her a really lovely story, so she's got the PR, essentially it's a PR exercise for her. And they're going to design some earrings or bracelets based on the species that are in that [meadow]...and we've managed to take that out of food production, put it into biodiversity, and still maintain an income source' (Penlington 2024, 714).



Figure 82. Monica's Meadow with Holkham National Nature Reserve visible beyond it (author's photo)

Peter Mitchell, Head of Sustainability for Gascoyne Estates, for which Hatfield House is the primary seat, spoke about how Hatfield has pursued environmental objectives beyond their work in regenerative farming and sustainable parkland maintenance. He discussed the following habitat creation work in response to a query about arable reversion projects:

Mitchell: ‘...we are taking...a slightly dislocated block of [arable] land of about eighty hectares...it doesn't produce anything meaningful in terms of farming. So effectively, all we're doing is spraying enormous quantities of fertiliser and burning diesel for absolutely no benefit. And that land [has] got a chalk stream running through the middle of it. So we are working on a project and how we put a funding package together for making that into a habitat bank. And so that's going to be a mixture of new woodland of re-wiggled chalk stream, flower rich grassland [and] we're looking at what sort of grazing regimes [we] might use, but likely some sort of conservation grazing going on. So...that's kind of a decent size block, which we are going to take out of production entirely’ (Mitchell 2023, 594).

However, Mitchell cited an internal preference for larger initiatives operating in partnership with multiple stakeholders as a result of their substantial landholdings:

Mitchell: ‘My preference [for nature recovery] would be let's do something strategic and let's get some massive, proper scale on it, given the extent of the landholding and we're moving in that direction... we are very engaged with the local nature recovery strategy. I

sit on the steering group for the Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy [and] we are seen locally as people who are influential in that land and that management space. We would like to provide part of our estates to contribute to a wider strategic goal...which has strategic biodiversity significance and water quality significance' (Mitchell 2023, 590).

While in practice, much of the ecological work of independent properties might mirror that undertaken by the Trust, the logistics and site contexts are more varied, a point which Peter Mitchell raised during his interview:

Mitchell: '...what I really enjoy about working in this particular industry is that if I tried to do my job at Holkham, it [would] be a completely different job because...the [owner of] house is different and [so] they've got different focuses' (Mitchell 2023, 588).

Holkham's commitment to farming places their regenerative agriculture centre stage, while Hatfield's substantial landholdings support an organisational interest in large-scale planning works in partnership with local authorities. As Harewood House Trust's remit is limited to the house and grounds they are unable to pursue any form of arable reversion schemes, however, a variety of habitat creation projects are being pursued within the boundaries of their registered parkland. Hence, while these renegotiations in land use pivot around an axis of environmental conservation and rehabilitation, the means by which that work is delivered is subject to the particular ideologies, management strategies, financial resources, and scope of a specific estate or organisation. In contrast to the more diverse projects pursued by independent estates, the National Trust has established a clear directive in estate landscape stewardship marked by extensive mixed woodland and habitat creation, agri-environmental reversion schemes, and increased public access to those rehabilitated natural spaces. Nevertheless, regardless of the ownership structure of a particular property, the extent of land bound up in these historic estates puts them at the heart of discussions around issues regarding land and the environment:

Mitchell: '...as owners of large amounts of land and we are watching all this stuff happen around us and the policies firming up, [we are] aware that we're going to have to pivot to make our business model viable going forward.'

Graham: '...if, as you said, land is the critical element here in terms of addressing these contemporary environmental issues, [then] that relevancy of land puts Britain's landowners, right at the focal point of that.'

Mitchell: 'Precisely, yeah' (Mitchell 2023, 596-597).

Therefore, despite differences amongst various properties either in terms of an overarching organisational membership or between individual independent estates, these historic landscapes are linked through the central role that land plays in addressing issues of anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss. Moreover, in light of the extent of land in England which is held within these estates, trends towards these redevelopments and nature recovery projects have a notable effect on the structure and scenery of the English landscape at large. Indeed, if these trends continue, landed estates of the future might reflect a shared grammar of a 'rougher naturalness' which parallels their distinct, historical landscape character of arable farms and designed parkland. As with the changes in parkland aesthetics and management or the regenerative farming initiatives analysed in Chapter 4, these arable reversion and nature recovery schemes further strengthen the connections between historic estates across the industry by way of their renegotiation of priorities in the use of land. However, privately owned estates in particular are increasingly turning to a recognisable rewilding model that acts as both an environmental strategy and popular ecotourism based commercial venture and will be analysed in the following section

5.2 Rewilding

Knepp and the Popularisation of Rewilding

As referenced above, the work of Dutch ecologist Frans Vera has heavily informed current rewilding trends in Europe and the UK, despite some critiques of his assessments of prehistoric landscapes (Leadbeater *et al.* 2022; Locquet & Carver 2022). Moreover, his wood-pasture hypothesis (Vera 2000) and work with the Dutch rewilding experiment, Oostvaardersplassen (OVP), was a primary inspiration for Isabella Tree and Sir Charles Burrell to pursue rewilding at the Knepp Estate (Tree 2018). While they have not been consulted for this research, the well-documented rewilding project at Knepp provides a useful overview of the ways in which rewilding has been approached at other estates in England. Moreover, it was one of the first privately-funded rewilding projects and the first lowland rewilding project in England at such a significant scale. Having yielded substantial financial and ecological success, their work has inspired a number of other landowners to pursue similar schemes and references to them in conversations on rewilding in Britain are ubiquitous. Furthermore, the team at the Knepp estate have served as consultants for the rewilding project currently being undertaken at Mapperton that is presented in this research, further establishing their relevance to the present work. Hence, a review of their landscape and species recovery and ecotourism project, *Knepp Wildland* is presented here to contextualise discussions about *Mapperton Wildlands* and other historic estates which have integrated similar rewilding regimes.

Sir Charles Burrell, 10th Baronet and his wife Isabella Tree, own and manage the 3,500-acre Knepp estate in West Sussex. After taking over its management from his grandparents in 1983, Burrell continued to operate the estate as an intensive, commercial farming operation until 2000 when its farm and dairy machinery was sold off and arable fields let to contract to overcome substantial debt (Tree 2018, *xiv*). As with the restoration of the parkland at Burton Constable Hall in 1999, Knepp received funding through the Countryside Stewardship scheme in 2001 to restore the estate's 350-acre 'Repton Park', including the reintroduction of fallow deer in 2002. Consultations with advisors from English Nature then began in 2003 on the possibility of rewilding at Knepp after the fallowing of the estate's least productive fields. Over the next ten years, further areas of the estate were given over to nature, supported by the reintroduction of various herbivores and grazing mammals, including Exmoor ponies and English longhorn cattle in 2003, Tamworth pigs in 2004, and red deer in 2013 (Tree 2018, *xv-xvii*). A decade on from initial consultation, the estate's safari park and campsite, *Knepp Wildland* (Figure 83), opened in 2014, integrating a key ecotourism component into their rewilding model (Tree 2018, *xviii-xxi*).



Figure 83. Exmoor ponies during one of Knepp Wildland's safari tours (Knepp 2026b)

The commercial success of Knepp estate's rewilding project cannot be overstated. From extensive media attention (Britten 2025; Riminton-Drury 2020; Barkham 2018), to multiple pieces in National Geographic (Tree 2020; Warrell 2018; Tree 2015), television features (*Countryfile* 2025; *Springwatch* 2020), a film adaptation (*Wilding* 2025), an art exhibition (Knepp

2025) and an illustrated children's book adaptation of their rewilding project, *When We Went Wild* (Tree 2021), Sir Charles Burrell and Isabella Tree have converted their ailing farming estate into an enterprising ecotourism business. Nevertheless, the reimagining of their estate has not been without criticism, targeted both at their approach and ideological underpinnings. In light of the various interpretations discussed above, particularly the 'domesticated' form of 'rewilding' which characterises the work undertaken at Knepp, some have taken issue with their use of the term. Leadbeater *et al.* (2022) argue that while they recognise Knepp's achievements in species abundance and diversity, their project fails to diverge from anthropocentric land-use models. They claim that on account of the depth of human intervention through requisite herbivore culling and the *Knepp Wildland* 'safari park' model, Knepp betrays the ideological core of the rewilding movement wherein humans 'cede control' to nature. Furthermore, they question the integrity of the term in such instances should this blueprint for rewilding proliferate:

'...ultimately, will we continue to perceive this as rewilding if the country estate business case requires the preservation of landscapes little more natural than a Capability Brown parkland?' (Leadbeater *et al.* 2022, 370)

Reprovals regarding the delivery of their rewilding project were made by one research participant during a discussion with the author regarding financial motivations for rewilding amongst historic estates:

Interviewee: 'I also think that these big estates are finding this is another way of engaging with the public and getting the public to visit and getting the public to *pay* to visit is by rewilding their estates...so we mustn't always think it's altruistic.'

Graham: 'Sure...and at the end of the day...a lot of these estates have pivoted away from this...very traditional kind of...house museum tour...towards this contemporary landscape focus on environmentalism and health and wellbeing, but...whether it's a private company or a charitable trust...the end goal is to make money and whether that's to support the estate or to support the charitable mission, you know, it takes money.'

Interviewee: 'You must have heard of Knepp...'

Graham: 'Yes.'

Interviewee: 'Well, the point is, that was a failing arable estate, with lots of farm workers who lived in cottages on the estate and how they made that sustainable is by actually making those people redundant and having all their cottages as holiday cottages. And that's what pays for the rewilding...which they don't talk about' (Anonymous).

Another interviewee also called attention to the financial incentive of Knepp's rewilding project. During a conversation about why estate owners may be taking advantage of government funding for habitat creation through arable reversion, they remarked that:

Interviewee: '...if you're an estate owner, let's say you've got three options. You [can] rent the farm out on long term tenancies...Agricultural Holding Act tenancies where your rental income is [an average of £180 a hectare] ...or you've got FBTs [Farm Business Tenancy]...which is slightly more expensive... [at an average of £229 a hectare], depending on the quality of the land. And...then you've got the in-house...farm [and] those big estates are generally either extensive grassland or arable, which [can be] hard to make decent profit on, especially if your qualifications as a landowner isn't agriculture, where you're relying on consultants and management teams to run a profitable business in this commodity market, which is a tough gig. So those three options are either out of your control or quite hard to manage, whereas going down a Knepp model, like you could basically argue that the reason that Knepp are rewilding is because they're failed farmers. They tried farming and they weren't very good at it, and they lost money doing it.... Whereas setting up this business and being really interested in nature and rewilding, they found their niche and it's now massively backed by government schemes. So, like, the wood-pasture creation is [£544 a hectare], plus capital grants, plus the rare breed, like native cattle supplements. You're up to like, £6-700+ a hectare for not really a lot of risk. And pretty easy management, you can just employ one of the Knepp consultants, and then you can layer on your open garden and your meat and your visits and your tours and everything else, and glamping. And it's a pretty well-structured business model that's pretty manageable, probably fits a lot of their ideals. And, you know, you can manage it with a small team of people fairly accurately' (Anonymous).⁵

The capacity for risk mitigation in moving towards a Knepp model of rewilding is a significant consideration. Analysed in more depth below (Chapter 6.1), farming is a high-risk industry and consequently agri-environmental funding streams are key for integrating ecological strategies into these landscapes. Beyond the combined reduction in requisite resources and the government payouts which support such rewilding initiatives, the capacity for further income diversification through ecotourism increases the economic incentives of this model.

⁵ Value estimates given by the interviewee were revised by the author and are presented in brackets to best reflect actual costs (Defra 2026c; Defra 2025e)

Regardless of what the primary catalysts may have been behind their rewilding project or the degree to which it would even be considered as such by ecologists or conservationists, the commercial and popular success of Knepp is undeniable, accompanied by legitimate advances in local biodiversity, including a 900% increase in breeding birds and a similar growth in certain species of winged insects (Knepp 2026c; Leadbeater *et al.* 2022). Moreover, by serving as a successful case study for its implementation in parallel contexts, Knepp has inspired other private house owners to pursue similar rewilding projects (Elmore 2025; Morrissy-Swan 2021). Peter Mitchell of Gascoyne Estates joked about this marked rise in popularity, ‘everyone wants a beaver and a bison’ (Mitchell 2023, 591). Indeed, WildEast is a private estate-led nature recovery and rewilding movement which seeks to give 20% of East Anglia back to nature. Founded in 2020 by Hugh Crossley of Somerleyton Estate along with fellow local landowners Olly Birkbeck (Little Massingham Estate) and Argus Hardy, it has since expanded in scope, rebranding to WildKingdom, aiming to expand their nature restoration mission to the rest of the UK (Rewilding Britain 2025g; Wild East 2025). There are likely to be a number of motivating factors which are encouraging estate owners to turn over significant portions of their land to areas of ‘domesticated’ wildness. Nevertheless, this model of estate ‘Kneppification’ is undoubtedly attractive since it appeals to contemporary environmental issues while maximising and diversifying income and minimising potential agricultural risks.

A comprehensive assessment of the rewilding movement either in England or across the UK as a whole requires more space than the present work allows. However, the following section will consider how, like Knepp, Mapperton has pursued a nature-based redevelopment of their south Dorset estate and as a result, physically and conceptually transformed their landscape and visitor experience.

Rewilding an Historic Estate: *Mapperton Wildlands*

Following consultancy provided by Knepp in 2020, Luke and Julie Montagu, 12th Earl and Countess of Sandwich, have been reshaping their 1,900-acre Mapperton estate through a combination of regenerative agriculture, traditional environmental conservation work and, most notably, a landscape-scale rewilding project, *Mapperton Wildlands*. Unlike Knepp, where their entire estate was turned over to rewilding, Mapperton has retained a reduced area of arable farming, including the regenerative Marsh Farm led by Tom and Sophie Gregory that featured above in Chapter 4.2. The Montagu’s 1,000-acre rewilding project began with 200 acres of what was previously a tenanted dairy farming operation at Coltleigh Farm that started to regenerate naturally after the end of its tenancy, mirroring other schemes in England that typically resulted from a process of active or passive land abandonment. At Mapperton, the decision to rewild



Figure 84. Scrub and sward at Coltleigh, a point of interest on Mapperton's roughly four-mile circular rewilding safari walk (author's photo)

such a significant portion of the estate stemmed from this natural 'scrubbing up' of the landscape after the withdrawal of intensive dairying:

Graham: '...so thinking about the rewilding work there at Coltleigh (Figure 84), is that something that before you got involved with Knepp that Mapperton had already been working on?'

Kingston: 'No, we hadn't necessarily physically been working on it. It just sort of happens quite naturally at Mapperton. So, we tend to scrub up quite well [and] we have low grazing-livestock numbers anyway.'

Graham: 'So, was that...let to nature because...it was an intentional plan to rewild...or...as you reduced farming, it just...went over [to nature]?'

Kingston: It used to be a small, productive dairy farm, probably up until about maybe...twenty odd years ago. I don't know how many cows they were milking up there, but that tenancy ended and then from that point on it was just grazed by beef and sheep farmers and it naturally became less intensive and began to scrub up, and the hedges began to grow over...' (Kingston 2025, 755-757).

While the land at Coltleigh Farm inadvertently began to return to nature after the tenancy ended, Kingston revealed how the decision to further rewild that space was part of a wider interest among Mapperton's family owners in prioritising sustainability and environmental conservation across the estate:

Graham: ‘...thinking about some of these driving factors for [regenerative farming]...what were...some of the motivating factors that got you all interested in approaching farming in that kind of way?’

Kingston: ‘Well, I suppose the regen farming and the rewilding do, in a way, follow similar principles. [But] certainly the rewilding, I remember having conversations with Luke about it during lockdown. So, it's been a good four or five years in the making and as rental incomes and land rents were going down, although we were getting the basic payment, now the basic payment's going down. So, if we were still letting land on short term arrangements and getting the basic payment, our income would be really quite low. [So we're getting] payments through Countryside Stewardship and also one of the key drivers was Luke wanting to have a future and basically have a [natural] environment here for his children...his youngest is particularly keen on the environment and wildlife. So that was one of the key drivers for Luke, and it did go hand in hand. I mean, Tom and Sophie [Gregory] were the key drivers as far as the regen farming was concerned. And because [that] sort of knitted so well with locking in carbon and just creating more diverse habitats. It just fitted in with what Luke was wanting to achieve for the overall estate’ (Kingston 2025, 753).



Figure 85. Formerly arable land converted to wildflower meadow, recently planted in Autumn 2024 and not yet fully matured (author's photo)

Having decided to pursue a landscape-scale objective for nature recovery, Mapperton consulted with Knepp to formulate a blueprint for turning this initial process of land abandonment into an estate-wide rewilding programme:

Graham: ‘I understand that you all had been involved with Knepp in in getting some of this work done?’

Kingston: ‘...yeah, so we had a meeting with Ivan de Klee [conservationist at Knepp], must have been soon after lockdown finished. So he came down and had a good old chat with Luke and walked around and took him up to Coltleigh, and yeah, he was just blown away by the comparison. If you were to compare Coltleigh against Knepp [at the beginning], we were just sort of miles ahead already because of just the [state of the] landscape’ (Kingston 2025, 755).



Figure 86. Forty-acre parcel of wood-pasture creation with native English oak and field maple (author's photo)

Once this rewilding plan had been drawn up, active land abandonment followed, with intentional habitat creation projects undertaken through processes of arable reversion, encompassing another 257 acres of mixed habitats including wildflower meadows (Figure 85), wood-pasture (Figure 86) and closed woodland (Mapperton Wildlands 2025).

In accordance with both the author's definition of rewilding and Knepp's landscape model, Mapperton introduced a small herd of white park cattle, an ancient native breed, for conservation grazing in 2021. Other heritage breeds have also been brought into the scheme as proxy species which mimic the ecological effects of historic wild animals. As with the sequential inclusion of such animals at Knepp, Mapperton brought beavers to the estate in 2022 along with a hybrid of Tamworth pigs and wild boar, seeking to replicate Iron Age pigs (Figure 87), and Exmoor ponies in 2023 (Figure 88) (Mapperton Wildlands 2025). Furthermore, the estate has incorporated a visitor-facing ecotourism component to their rewilding project with a number of offerings for the public, from self-guided wildlife walks to expert-led tours with

Mapperton's rewilding team and their Head of Ecology, Professor Tom Bereton (Mapperton Wildlands 2025). Additionally, a small glamping site, Mapperton Camps, is available and is set within the boundaries of their primary rewilding project at Coltleigh (Mapperton Camps 2025). With roughly half of the estate's planned 1,000 acres currently under rewilding and nature



Figure 87. Bracken bruising, evidence of pig activity (author's photo)

recovery, Mapperton has made strides in reverting such a large portion of their estate to habitats of greater biodiversity in a relatively short period of time. However, as mentioned earlier, the absence of critical predator species in British, and particularly English rewilding strategies, can complicate project delivery. This point was raised with Kingston when asked about challenges in moving forward with their work on *Mapperton Wildlands*:

Kingston: 'Our biggest problem, as far as the rewilding is concerned and creating the wood-pasture that we want to create is the population of deer. So we had...a thermal imagery drone survey...and it showed, I think, about thirty deer per hectare on our estate, which is massive. That's our biggest problem, is the pressure of deer, and...one of the key problems that we have in our SSSIs as well is the pressure of deer preventing them from improving.'



Figure 88. Exmoor ponies at Mapperton (author's photo)

Graham: 'I wouldn't imagine that besides culling the deer, that there's much that could be done about that population?'

Kingston: '[Laughs] yea, not really...We do have an active deer management program in place, as we do a squirrel control program, and through...the Countryside Stewardship and through the sort of larger Landscape Recovery scheme, we are beginning to talk again with local landowners to sort of try and create a more joined up approach' (Kingston 2025, 756-757).

The rewilding and the reversion of formerly arable land has become subject to debate within the UK and is a contentious issue for many farmers in the country (Mikołajczak *et al.* 2022). Kingston cited perceptions of the purpose and significance of land as another challenge in expanding and delivering on their rewilding aims:

Kingston: '...[we've received negative comments from neighbours] as to what we're doing and why we're doing it...particularly our big, sort of 45-acre arable field, "wow, that should be cropped. It's criminal that it's not cropped". And yeah, some of the weed species that are inevitably going to come up once the land is let to breathe and recover, isn't everyone's cup of tea. So, yeah, neighbouring perceptions have probably been a big challenge as well' (Kingston 2025, 758).



Figure 89. Looking southeast over Mapperton Wildlands with grazing Exmoor ponies in the foreground (author's photo)

These criticisms mirror earlier comments made in reference to debates and varied opinions on the value and significance of farm and parkland landscapes and further contribute to the conclusion that the rural English estate landscape is tangibly changing through a broad reconceptualisation. However, if the successes of Knepp, who have served as project consultants, are any indicators then the species introduction and regeneration of the environmental landscape since the cessation of farming at Mapperton is promising for biodiversity gains. Moreover, in spite of the criticism of these spaces as ‘little more than a Capability Brown parkland’ (Leadbeater *et al.* 2022, 370), when situated within this ‘rewilded’ landscape (Figure 89), there is a sense of disconnect for the visitor from the cultural and historical archetype of the English estate with its stately home and the naturalistic parkland and ordered fields which have traditionally accompanied it. Indeed, while Kingston acknowledges the need for human intervention resulting from the absence of natural predators, as a cultural landscape, *Mapperton Wildlands* reflects a transformative shift. Mapperton’s self-guided safari visitor guide (Figure 90) which highlights standing dead wood, free-roaming ponies, and rooting pigs is an appeal to site significance far from the traditional or ‘authorised’ cultural heritage

paradigm of the 'cult of the country house'.

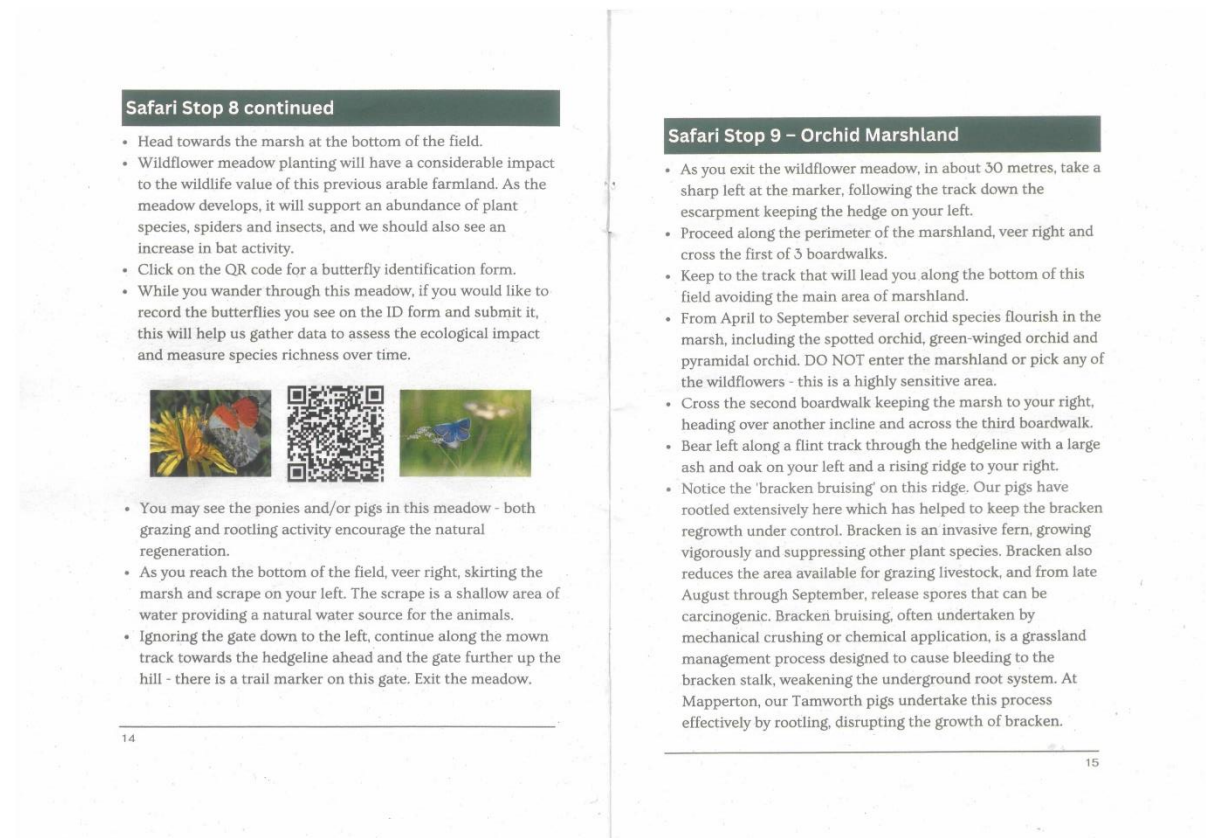


Figure 90. Selection from the Mapperton Wildlands self-guided safari guide booklet

From Mapperton, to Knepp or Somerleyton, country house owners are redefining the practical and aesthetic significance of their estate landscapes. At this intersection of environmentalism, land ownership, and the long-term financial sustainability of these historic estates, rewilding has emerged as a popular choice for private estate owners. This movement is facilitated by the more flexible interpretation of 'rewilding' in European contexts discussed at the outset of this chapter, which allows for the integration of human activity into these rewilded landscapes in contrast to North American models. Supported by the availability of government subsidies for ecological recovery works and commercial opportunities for ecotourism and nature-based hospitality programming, house owners are turning to rewilding as a means of de-intensifying agricultural production, minimising labour demands and maximising economic efficiency, while appealing to contemporary concerns about biodiversity loss and climate change. There is an interesting historical parallel with the late eighteenth-century rejection of the naturalistic parklands of Brown and his associates to the more rugged Picturesque landscapes prized by Knight or Gilpin (Knight 1794; Gilpin 1792). On the topic of rewilding, one interviewee remarked that 'it's kind of civilised showing off, isn't it?' (Anonymous). Brook (2008, 117) argued that the aesthetic sense of the Picturesque might be well suited to 'bridging the gap' between order and

‘extreme wildness’. Thus, this new English estate model of ‘domesticated rewilding’ can be interpreted as a similar aesthetic and cultural expression which mirrors Claire Kingston’s (Mapperton estate) observation that these landowners have ‘become aesthetically interested’ in rewilded landscapes (Kingston 2025, 762). As a result, Waterton’s (2010 8-9,13) point that the integration of progressive concerns into asset management systems does not necessarily undermine the presence of elite-led valuations is a relevant consideration. Indeed, Drenthen (2018) argued that rather than a return to the natural, rewilding, particularly in such ‘domesticated’ contexts, is merely a new form of cultural expression in the landscape – in this case one which continues to speak to narratives of the landed elite. Furthermore, issues related to community participation and access within the management and use of these spaces has the potential to uncover deeper tensions and power dynamics present within England’s privately owned landscapes (Ratcliffe 2024; Shrubsole 2024; Hodsdon 2021, 271-272). Nevertheless, the subjectivity of place and the emotional experience of a physical environment has been shown to supersede the historical and cultural meanings of natural spaces (Jepson & Sharpley 2015, 1173- 1174), potentially muting the implicit class expressions of large-scale landscape manipulation for visitors to these sites.

Site	Type of Scheme	Interventions
<i>Calke Abbey</i> (NT)	Habitat	Arable reversion to 332 acres of mixed wood pasture and woodland, including 28,000 native trees
	Creation	
<i>Hardwick</i> (NT)	Habitat	Arable reversion to 439 acres of mixed wood pasture and woodland, including 12,800 trees
	Creation	
<i>Wimpole</i> (NT)	Habitat	Arable reversion to 321 acres of mixed wood pasture, woodland and agroforestry
	Creation	
<i>Holkham</i> (Ind)	Habitat	Piecemeal tree planting in park, arable reversion to wildflower meadow
	Creation	
<i>Harewood</i> (Ind)	Habitat	Full parkland restoration including mixed woodland and grassland planting and planned introduction of heritage breed animals
	Creation	
<i>Hatfield</i> (Ind)	Habitat	Arable reversion to 197 acres of woodland, grassland and chalk stream
	Creation	
<i>Mapperton</i> (Ind)	Rewilding	Arable reversion to 497 acres of 1,000-acre plan) of mixed woodland, grassland, scrubland and wildflower meadow. Species introduction including White Park cattle, Tamworth pigs, Exmoor ponies and beavers

Table 4. Review of the case study sites mentioned in Chapter 5, including how their landscape recovery work has been defined in this work as well as what interventions, including any numerical references, have appeared in this chapter.

As the foregoing commentaries have shown, regardless of a popular or eco-centric interest in either rewilding or habitat creation schemes (Table 4), economic considerations are critical.

Consequently, to determine how these trends may continue in the future, it is important to examine the potential catalysts in more detail. The following chapter will shed light on the relationship between socio-cultural and economic factors in driving these environmental strategies, from regenerative farming and revised parkland management to habitat creation and rewilding. Furthermore, it will examine how these changes in the landscape are part of a broader focal shift towards the country house's wider estate as principal visitor destinations within the heritage industry.

Chapter 6. Landscapes of Change

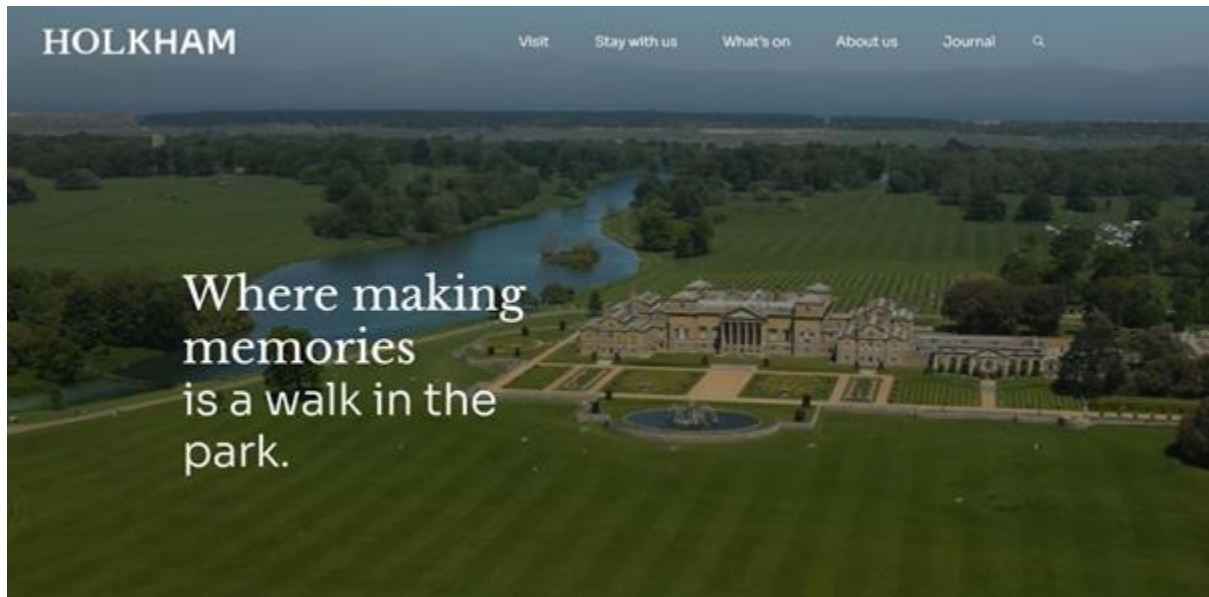


Figure 91. Front page banner image from Holkham's website, appealing to place attachment and site significance through outdoor leisure in Holkham Park (Holkham 2023)

'Country-house owners have survived owing to their ability to adapt to different situations over the centuries'

Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (1978, 10)

The story of the English country house is marked by continuity, but also by processes of evolution and adaptation. Documented by a substantial body of literature (see Chapter 2.3), the history of these complex and multi-generational foci of power has been defined by innovations in their artistic, architectural, environmental, social, political and economic form and function, reflecting the tastes, necessities, and particular interests of their owners and their environments; Sir Vauncey Crewe's (1846-1924) preference for sport and disinterest in farming which gave Calke Abbey its rugged and biodiverse parkland is just one such example. Priorities and management strategies in landscape use changed over the twentieth century when the parkland was used for high density, intensive pastoral farming. Within a few generations the 'place value' of Calke Park evolved, from rough sporting ground to intensified farmland in a wartime and post-war nationalist framework, and then again at the end of the century, into an eco-heritage nature preserve. This sequential transformation reflected shifts in the perception and valuation of landscape from both internal stakeholders and Calke's wider social, geopolitical, and economic climates. At the national level this period witnessed the 'fall and rise' of these historic seats' local and national authority with their reinterpretation as fundamental to the nation's cultural heritage. Charitable organisations and house owners refashioned their country seats as popular tourist destinations to counter the economic and

political decay that had plagued them since the later Victorian period (Clemenson 1982 [2021], 109-115; Mandler 1997). The twenty-first century is no different and generational vicissitudes among stately-home owners and stakeholders in more recent years have had an important impact on how these historic sites operate and relate to their human and environmental contexts. The Countess of Sandwich's YouTube-based work-along yoga videos (Figure 92) held at Mapperton are a striking cultural turn from what the second Richard Brodrepp (c. 1639-1707) must have envisioned in the later seventeenth century when he began substantial alterations to the Tudor manor, the end results of which have been preserved and are visible today (Historic England 2013).



An Energising Yoga Flow in front of our 16th Century Manor House

Figure 92. Video still from the YouTube channel, American Countess (American Countess 2021)

A similar contradiction exists between the now publicly accessible Lady Spencer's Wood (Figure 93) at Hardwick Park and its original creation as private recreational space for Georgiana Spencer (1757-1806), 5th Duchess of Devonshire.

Although this thesis has hitherto prioritised an environmental perspective in its assessment of changes in estate landscape use, an interwoven relationship exists between these eco-landscape strategies and an increasing emphasis on these landscapes for tourism and public engagement. This link between the environmental and recreational significance of these landscapes is made through a generalised investment focus in the outdoors at country house sites, something National Trust staff have referred to as a 'land, outdoors, and nature' strategy



Figure 93. Families using Lady Spencer's walk at Hardwick (author's photo)

(Buffey 2023, 273). Within these comprehensive landscape investment strategies are two key strands which the following chapter will examine in more detail. The first involves the philosophies and incentives driving new, twenty-first century approaches to parkland and farmland management and habitat creation explored in the previous two chapters. The second concerns itself with contemporary trends in visitor experience and heritage management strategies that diverge from older, traditional country-house museum models which have prioritised the house and its collections. As this chapter will demonstrate, this divergence reflects a turn in heritage management towards addressing contemporary socio-cultural issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and human health and wellbeing for which these landscapes, particularly parklands, are exceptionally important. Moreover, this shift towards the outdoors in heritage management and visitor programming is largely driven by changing visitor demographics with an increased interest in outdoor recreation among the public and has sustained high levels of visitor engagement. For instance, the National Trust experienced a 39% surge in Gen Z (ages 18-25) membership from 2024-2025 and according to a report on heritage assets in the UK published by the Trust, individuals aged 18-44 are now more likely than older generations to visit heritage sites and landscapes (National Trust 2025a; National Trust 2025d). These developments challenge the conventional conservative and elitist heritage valuations of the country house which became entrenched during the later twentieth century and led to their appraisal as emblematic of the authorised heritage discourse in Britain (Smith 2006; Mandler 1997, 1; Hewison 1987; Wright 1985 [2009]). Assessing these landscapes holistically – as both

natural environments and heritage tourism destinations – provides an invitation to reconceptualise these estates when read through these new, contemporary forms of land use.

6.1 New Perspectives and Estate Ecology

The preceding chapters have touched on factors driving estate landscape change through their survey of the practical implementations of ecologically orientated management schemes from reduced parkland maintenance policies to large-scale rewilding projects. However, interviews also enquired into the broader economic and socio-political shifts that contextualise these initiatives. The driving force of this ‘green revolution’ among the ownership structures represented within this research can be divided thematically into two separate, but interconnected factors. The first of these is a greater sensitivity to environmental issues among the general population, and in particular among the succeeding generation of owners and staff who are now entering into estate ownership and employment. The second relates to more pragmatic financial incentives from governmental funding streams with supplementary support from private resources. Though they should be understood as interrelated, for example, the creation of parliamentary agri-environment schemes can be interpreted as a result of a greater global public awareness of climate change and biodiversity loss, they are presented independently here for clarity.

Social Change and Legacy

When queried about what might be driving this new emphasis on environmental conservation and rehabilitation on country estates, increased awareness of, and sympathy for environmental and climatological issues among relevant decision makers and the public was frequently cited. While these eco-estate initiatives are somewhat reflective of surging climate change awareness and environmental sensitivities across all ages (UNDP 2024; ONS 2021), they mirror data (Poortinga *et al.* 2023; Tyson *et al.* 2021) that suggests younger generations are more engaged with these issues and interviewees referenced the significant effect that younger individuals entering the industry has on ideological and operative change. While touring Holkham’s Home Farm, Sue Penlington, Holkham’s first sustainability manager, appointed in 2020, discussed the importance of these generational differences with regard to management and conservation, with particular reference to the importance of Holkham’s renowned shoot:

Penlington: ‘Really great young farm team. Only, sort of seven of them full time, and then we’ll get some harvest students...they’re all absolutely supportive of and are pushing things in terms of, you know, strip till, or reducing herbicides, reducing inputs.’

Graham: '[Is it that] people that are getting involved now with food production and with parkland management, things like that, are of a younger generation, where they're more sensitive to environmental issues or they grew up with more sensitivities to that...?'

Penlington: '...you're totally right. So Ned, who's the heir, he's twenty-one this year, I think. He's literally working on the potato business at the moment...his sister...Mina, has spent some time in London, you know, graduated, done the Grand Tour, what have you...she's come back to spend a year on the estate to just understand it more. She's really interested in land and conservation, not much interested in the farm, which I think is quite positive actually, because there's potentially room for both of them... and they're the next generation. And I think you know, for me...[if] we want to be sustainable – to be honest, the shoot kind of irks me a little bit. So we buy in baby pheasants, bring them up and shoot them, which, you know, fair play, that's what Lord Leicester would like to do. I kind of think that the shoot should go back to what it originally was, which was a wild shoot. So, take the surplus...come to shoot...to experience the day at Holkham is massive...they don't care whether they get five hundred birds in a bag or not...but, like I say, you've got to respect Lord Leicester. That's how he wants it. I imagine Ned, or certainly Ned's children, will change that' (Penlington 2024, 706-707).

Peter Mitchell, Head of Sustainability for Gascoyne Estates since 2023, remarked that both Lord Salisbury and his son, Lord Cranborne, are deeply engaged with the businesses across the Gascoyne estates and similarly highlighted the significance of generational change through contrasting inputs on estate directives:

Mitchell: '...when the current owner passes away, and his son takes over; his son, who I've spent quite a lot of time talking to, his son's got a whole different suite of ideas again, you know, it's that that sort of generational evolution, it's quite interesting' (Mitchell 2025; 2023, 590).

According to Claire Kingston, when Luke Montagu, current 12th Earl of Sandwich, formerly Viscount Hinchinbrooke, took up the reins from his father in 2016, a similar, more environmentally-conscious redirection in estate management occurred. Not only did he reorientate landscape development, but he led a reconceptualisation of how the estate perceives itself and seeks to relate to the wider public:

Graham: 'I was curious [about] your thoughts on...rewilding or nature-based solutions, and interest in environmental gains...whether those are estate owners...farmers or

rangers or – I was curious to know what you feel have been some of the big drivers of this interest? Is it just merely generational change that younger people are more familiar with this? Or are there other things that are leading this kind of change?’

Kingston: ‘I would say definitely it's a generational change. The older generation are very traditional, and...certainly at Mapperton it's a generational change, and it's definitely the current owners, Luke and Julie...wanting to embrace what they've got at Mapperton. And...they're big on YouTube, and...they're wanting to share it... It's been a big change, but yeah, definitely thinking outside the box and thinking of finding ways to make it work for the future generation’ (Kingston 2025, 763-765).

This generational shift towards prioritising the environment in estate management was similarly reported by interviewees employed by the National Trust. When discussing the primary factors driving these developments, Jon Lewney, who has served as Countryside Manager at Calke Abbey since 2022 but has worked for the Trust since 2011, remarked that the influx of younger ranger staff along with changing public opinion has led to more ecologically sensitive estate management methodologies. Additionally, he highlighted a new and important emphasis in management training that connects the house to its wider estate which departs from older, house-focused oversight and interpretation:

Lewney: ‘So one is that we have got much better engaged general managers than we had, we had quite a historic set of general managers that sold presentation in houses [as] the key selling points, and our general managers now are being trained and taught that that's one element of what they've got to protect. The other thing is that ranger teams have changed an awful lot. So rangers are now more of a profession in their own right. Most rangers, as I qualified, came through three walks of life: they came through gamekeeping, agriculture or forestry. And now conservation is a degree in its own right and rangering has come that way. That's got positives and negatives, you know, the rangers that I recruit now are really passionate about ecology and nature, but they don't understand so much about grazing and livestock. They don't understand so much about ground nesting birds, the gamekeeper's all about ground nesting birds, they might not be native, but they know all about how to keep ground nesting birds. And, in some ways, some of those professions, forestry, agriculture, gamekeeping, they bring skills that although some of it's detrimental to conservation, a lot of it can be entwined... and then [finally] there's a piece really about what the visitor wants, you know what the visitor will understand about parkland and what their education is’ (Rasen & Lewney 2023, 410).

Andy Eddy, Head Gardener at Osterley Park in London, noted these same generational shifts both at Osterley and across the National Trust at the organisational level:

Eddy: 'I was at a conference with a whole lot of National Trust people a couple of months ago, and at one stage there were ten young people in their twenties at the table and I asked all of them what they thought about lawns and...none of them had any interest in lawns whatsoever, they didn't care about whether they were striped whether they were bright green or not. So that's a complete change in mentality from when I first joined the Trust where the lawns were the most important thing...you didn't think you were setting up your house or your landscape properly unless you had an immaculately striped lawn that was sprayed and had no weeds in it.'

Graham: '...that was actually something that the lead ranger at Hardwick had mentioned was that...there's also just simply a bit of a shift within the staff in the landscape context at the Trust.'

Eddy: 'My two youngest members of my team, they're both in their twenties and both of them refuse to spray any chemicals...so we're having to recruit more volunteers. So we can do more weeding by hand and that's fine. But that's just the way it's changed' (Eddy 2023, 821).

Concurring with Lewney on how this change among landscape and gardening staff at the Trust is complemented by revised expectations of country house landscapes among the visiting public, he continued:

Eddy: 'Once upon a time, our public and our visitors would have been horrified if we hadn't looked after those lawns in that way, they probably wouldn't have visited again, they probably would have given up their National Trust membership. But luckily, the public is with us as well now. So that's the sea change. So we're all in it together...which is good!' (Eddy 2023, 822)

Susan Hopkinson, Director of the Burton Constable Foundation also highlighted contrasts to earlier sensibilities and expectations among the public:

Hopkinson: 'People care about the environment. That is something that wasn't there when I first started. People care about whether you are operating in a way that is acceptable in modern terms, you know, whether you are working towards those goals of really improving your impact on the environment, and I think that people didn't necessarily think about that in the same way that they do now. That's what is most in

people's minds, that we're managing things without pesticides, managing things with wildlife in mind. They would, if you didn't tell them that, would ask. You never would have got that thirty years ago' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 327).

In addition to generational change and greater environmental concern among the visiting public, notions of legacy were also cited as an important element of green initiatives and nature conservation in historic estates, particularly in independent houses which remain in private ownership. This was touched on above regarding Mapperton's rewilding project. Mapperton's Estate Manager, Claire Kingston remarked that a major catalyst for *Mapperton Wildlands* was owner Luke Montagu 'wanting to have a future and...a [natural] environment here for his children' (Kingston 2025, 753). This idea of legacy preservation was also brought up while touring the Holkham estate. In reference to woodland habitat creation, Sue Penlington commented that these sorts of projects are not always a result of financial motivations, but to foster and invest in environmental heritage and patrimony:

Penlington: '...new woodland creation is an interesting one, because commercially, we will get a better profit from arable, but this case for woodland creation isn't a financial case. It's a legacy. It's heritage. It's carbon, it's biodiversity, it's land-use change. You know, if we're going to build a caravan park, let's immediately plant some trees now and loads of hedges and let's design the site. So there's other reasons for woodland creation. The smaller plots do stack up commercially through the funding...the awkward corners of the fields, or what have you...we've done that. But if you're looking...woodland creation adding another couple of hundred acres...it's a lot. It's a legacy commitment, isn't it? It's a long-term decision' (Penlington 2024, 734).

This idea of legacy was reiterated by Peter Mitchell, linking contemporary environmental concerns with an enduring history of resilience at Hatfield and its owning family: 'Sustainability is baked into the fabric of the business. It's been running for four hundred years, we haven't completely destroyed everything, so we must be doing something [right]' (Mitchell 2023, 580). When asked about what was pushing these changes and to what degree governmental incentives played a role in facilitating it, he continued:

Mitchell: 'I will say...that we are pushing for better performance than the government would demand. And as a result, I would say the push comes from an intrinsic desire to do the right thing. A sense of legacy, which is kind of the big word...you might hear that from other estates of this sort of scale, where actually, you know, the whole "we've been

here 400 years, and we want to be here for another 400 years” is a very pertinent consideration’ (Mitchell 2023, 581).

In constructing an assessment of what has motivated these estates to prioritise environmental benefits in their agricultural programmes and parkland management plans, changing public attitudes, generational differences, and notions of legacy and preservation are significant components. Nevertheless, to effectively deliver on these new ideals in land use, economic feasibility is paramount. As the following section will reveal, sufficient capital or financial support is critical in funding these green initiatives across England’s historic estates, particularly in regard to regenerative farming and habit creation work.

Financial Incentives and Government Interventions

Bearing in mind the cultural and philosophical turns discussed above, economic factors, both public and private, are still a significant and, at times, predominant consideration in the ‘greening’ of England’s historic estates in the twenty-first century. Chapter 4.2 briefly reviewed several decades of English agri-environmental and nature-based recovery schemes funded by the UK government. As a result of the devolution of agricultural policy in the United Kingdom, funding infrastructures are unique between individual nations (AHDB 2026). In England, for which this research is concerned, the introduction of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes after Brexit and the UK’s departure from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was one of the most significant reforms in agricultural policy and spending in decades (Defra 2023). At the time of research, the agri-environmental funding arrangements being utilised by participatory estates and their tenant farmers were a mix of extant agreements such as previous Countryside Stewardship schemes which had been entered into before Brexit as well as those being delivered under the government’s new ELM package, such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). In addition to the aforementioned factors driving environmental conservation from ideological or moral concerns such as heightened ecological conscientiousness among estate staff and the visiting public, to notions of legacy and eco-preservation among estate owners, practical financial concerns were a common theme during interviews. While private funding sources have sometimes been taken advantage of, such as Holkham’s partnership with a local jewellery designer to create a wildflower meadow habitat, this research shows that state support for environmentally sensitive and regenerative landscape management is vital to eco-rehabilitation. When queried about what he felt were the main drivers of ecological initiatives among Britain’s landed estates, Lord Kerry of Bowood House in Wiltshire singled out government backing:

Graham: ‘In your opinion what do you think have been some of the main drivers of ecological initiatives among Britain’s landed estates?’

Lord Kerry: ‘The 25-year environment plan. The decoupling of the Basic Payment Scheme from the need to occupy land and the introduction of increased payments for Natural Capital and environmental goods’ (Kerry 2024, 289).

The primary importance of government support was also pointed out by Claire Kingston in reference to the conservation work at Mapperton estate:

Graham: ‘...how important [is government funding] going to be for delivering these nature-based outcomes and environmental gains across these estates?’

Kingston: ‘Vital. Because obviously as productivity declined, and as the rental income that we've got was declining, and now it's gone full stop, these nature-based schemes, the environmental schemes, are critical for people like us...we are now a third or a quarter of what our basic payment was, it has dropped dramatically, like a stone. So yeah, they are critical, absolutely’ (Kingston 2025, 770).

This role that the national government plays in delivering environmental objectives is fundamental, as farmers are no different to any other businesses and will ‘follow the money’ (Cove 2024a, 512). In pursuing environmentally-friendly objectives, particularly in farming contexts, cost-benefit analyses must be made and risks must be mitigated in an industry that has been referred to as essentially a form of ‘high stakes gambling’ (Hassall 2024, 832). Historically, the benefit of agrochemical conventional farming has been a means of minimising risk while maximising output to the detriment of the natural environment (Bakker *et al.* 2021, 1; Watson *et al.* 1997). Inversely, shifts to environmentally sustainable farming methods are typically associated, at least in the short term, with reduced yields for which supplementary income is often necessary to assist estate owners and their tenant farmers in implementing these changes. Tom Gregory of Mapperton’s organic Marsh Farm discussed this issue of transition when asked about the importance of government subsidised risk mitigation in adopting nature-based solutions:

Gregory: ‘I think the risk definitely lies, especially within, if you're a conventional farmer, regenerative transition. That transition period where you can be reducing inputs and not seeing one, either increased yields or an increased market premium, because you're not actually, at that point, producing any outcomes or any more production, because you're starting with a dead or arid sort of environment where you've rigged and pillaged the soil

for umpteen, years, if not decades. And it's going to take a period of time to regenerate' (Gregory 2025, 782).

As mentioned above, Jon Lewney (Calke Abbey) remarked that SFI had encouraged many farmers to rethink their agricultural operations through increased revenue opportunities for decreased labour, 'can I leave that hedgerow alone...I'll get a payment for that...and it will save me on diesel and driver time and actually, I'll get fifty quid a metre or whatever' (Lewney 2024, 446). Penlington likewise emphasised the significance of funding support for regenerative farming practices through parliamentary initiatives such as SFI during on-site research at Holkham:

Penlington: 'Under SFI, you now get payments for...surveying a hedgerow, for managing a hedgerow, you get payments for all the margins. You get payments for no insecticides. So in the park this year, we're not using any insecticides. So we'll get a payment per hectare for that, which sort of takes the risk out of not using insecticides a little bit. It helps, obviously, incentivise us to do it.'

Graham: 'And I guess that's then...if you're going to get a payment for non-insecticide use, it eases a little bit of the pressure [or] risk...so if you don't deliver as much as maybe you did the previous year, you're having income that's supplemented through that?'

Penlington: 'Exactly. And it's a really interesting one, because so for farmers, and [the figures are hypothetical], but [let's say] one spray of insecticide could be £13 a hectare...the yield increase from that spray could be £100 a hectare. So if you're a farmer, you may as well...put the insecticide on and then take that profit. And as society that's what people do, because you want to minimize the risk, don't you? And I get that, because you're so dependent on the weather as a farmer. So it's an insurance strategy, and actually, it's easier to, if in doubt, give it a little bit of a boost' (Penlington 2024, 691).

These funding schemes have also facilitated a wholesale reduction of chemical inputs (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023) in Burton Constable's Capability Brown parkland which has been supported by Natural England through Countryside Stewardship since payments were secured to restore the heritage parkland in 1999:

Hopkinson: 'So many things that I've seen change are following the money. And [we] really saw that with Countryside Stewardship coming in, and you then had the leverage to go to your funders and say, look, if we manage the park in this particular way, we will be able to claim this amount of money, which made it much more interesting to them,

because really, all the time they were looking at spending the least money they could spend...everything was very focused on money. So it gave you a bit of a weapon to take things in the direction that you probably would not have been able to force them to go. So it's all around that sort of wider policy, and that will come out through the government policy and whatever the determination is over future land use, which obviously is so [central] to how we go forward, but you quite often need there to be some leverage of some money, "look, we can apply for this if we manage our land in this way." And that, to me, that seemed to be a really big turning point' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 326).

At the time of research, Wimpole estate's organic-certified, in-hand farming operation is in receipt of government funding through a pre-Brexit Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. When discussing the significance of state-level support for delivering agri-environmental objectives, David Hassall, Wimpole's Farm and Countryside Manager, also stressed its importance for risk aversion and raised concerns about the inefficacy of governmental backing as a result of the transient nature of ruling parties and their systems:

Graham: '...one of the things that I've been thinking about with this as well... is this idea that if the government wants certain changes within these farming systems, that these payments are necessary to offset potential losses.... And...what I've heard from others [is] there's sometimes a little bit of reticence, because the government will make these promises about, if you shift to this, we will pay you for this. But then how much is that going to be upheld in the next five years, the next ten years?'

Hassall: 'I think overall...if you are asking for significant change around these which would affect the fundamental viability of these businesses [and] if you want a thriving agricultural sector, you need to make these schemes available and compensate for some of those business losses.... There's many barriers to entry I see going into these schemes, the complexity of them, the sheer administrative burden of them, language barriers is a huge one. I'm in farming clusters where things that are obvious for me from a conservation background in the language [are] not obvious to an incredibly, highly skilled farmer who has incredible technical knowledge but [has] a whole different discipline under their belt.... Lack of photos, lack of sympathy of understanding [that] actually on the ground you may not be able to deliver that benefit, and even with best endeavours, actually getting penalized at the end of it means that you've actually got quite a lot of risk in your system, which then takes years to resolve. Withheld payments,

cash flow problems, which would have sunk other businesses that have affected us to the tune to hundreds of hundreds of thousands of pounds over the last few years of withheld payments, because, actually, we can't get a relatively simple administrative change to it, which we submitted two years ago to our current scheme. So there's lots of barriers to entry to these things, and a lot of them are caused by the government, frankly... I entered an SFI scheme two years ago, a three-year agreement. They cancelled it one year later, and I was left out of pocket as a result of it' (Hassall 2024, 832-834).

Hassall was not alone among research participants in his concerns about the sustainability of, and failures in parliamentary funding for agri-environment schemes. Penlington also commented on how the volatility of government support creates challenges for farmers in delivering on environmental objectives:

Penlington: '...to be fair to the farmers, they're only doing what they were asked to do by the government. You know we were told "plough everything up", maximum food production. That's what we've delivered. And now we're being asked to go the other way.

Graham: 'I've had some relay to me that in dealing with certain tenant farmers that they've had, or just in stories through the grapevine...[that] because of some of the flip flopping that sometimes certain farmers [might not be] particularly receptive, because there's a certain, "well, sure you're telling me this now...ten years from now, after all my fields look like this, what are you gonna have me do then?"'

Penlington: 'It's not even ten years, it's more like eighteen months at the moment which is just ridiculous' (Penlington 2024, 725).

Analogous to the history of these estates, natural timescales are multi-generational which contributes to the challenges of funding promised by the national government. As Lewney pointed out in reference to management systems at Calke estate, 'we think on human timescales too much. That's one of the problems. You know, my next woodland management plan is ten years' (Lewney 2024, 473). Andy Eddy at Osterley Park noted issues with the constant coming and going of ruling parties:

Graham: '...thinking of Defra's 25-year environment plan...some people are sceptical of the outcomes of that. ...in terms of the government's appeal to this environmental mission, what would be your take?'

Eddy: 'I think that they're saying all the right things, but I don't think they've got the bandwidth since COVID to, you know, to be really, really, really realistic about these

things. And also, I don't think governments are in long [enough] and I feel the way that our democratic system is set out – four or five-year terms – I mean, you really need benign dictatorship, don't you to do some of these things' (Eddy 2023, 822).

Eddy's observation on issues with parliamentary shortsightedness encapsulates much of the funding issues interviewees working in farm and countryside management have commented on. The long-term views required for delivering environmental goals can be upset by rapid changes in government policy. Hence, for those with sufficient capital or resources, private funding provides another option for agri-environmental work and landscape recovery projects, with potentially greater significance to come in light of insecurities in parliamentary assistance in the long term. Advantages of private funding over public were discussed with Sue Penlington (Holkham):

Penlington: 'So Monica's meadow, the wildflower meadow – we could serve our [residential] housebuilding [on the estate] for the next fifteen years just on that meadow.... [The meadow is] slightly less ambitious than we would have liked. But that's a thirty-year agreement, how many farmers are going to go into a thirty-year agreement when they don't really know what's coming with the next government?'

Graham: '...that was actually something that Peter Mitchell had mentioned at Hatfield...and even some places at the National Trust where they've [said] the governmental payouts are great and they provide also a baseline...demonstration of meeting certain standards, but if you're completely privately funded...then to some degree [you] have less constraints and you might be a little freer to negotiate that on your own terms...because then, as you've said, you're not beholden to changes in governments...'

Penlington: 'Yeah, exactly... I mean it's a volatile place, isn't it? You know, the war in Ukraine, suddenly fertiliser prices were twice the amount...COVID is still impacting people's decision making, the cost-of-living crisis. So, all of these short-term [events] and yet farming is such a long-term game. I mean, just growing one crop is literally twelve months' (Penlington 2024, 736-737).

Peter Mitchell revealed a preference for private funding at Gascoyne estates but corroborated the importance of governmental support for regenerative work at Hatfield, particularly in delivering large-scale landscape and habitat recovery projects:

Graham: 'Hatfield's website[mentions] that the farmland was supported by Countryside Stewardship. Can you comment on what sort of actions have been taken that are part of that funding scheme?'

Mitchell: '[We] effectively use Countryside Stewardship as additional income to do things that we would like to do anyway, but otherwise...wouldn't have the inclination to do it. And it's clover leys, it's wider margins, it's all those sorts of stuff.... My preference would be let's do something strategic and let's get some massive, some proper scale on it, given the extent of the land holding and we're moving in that direction. It's a good sort of viability filler, in terms of the farm, with BPS [Basic Payment Scheme], and with other subsidies tailing off, it's increasingly important in that budget. But also we don't see it as the way in which the farm stays viable going forward. So actually, we're looking at Biodiversity Net Gain, ESG [Environmental, Social & Governance] markets, landscape restoration funds, all of that stuff which delivers greater environmental benefit because of its scale but also provides that ongoing income for the land. So to try and summarize, Countryside Stewardship is important in the context of diminishing subsidy but actually doesn't underpin the way that the business runs particularly.'

Graham: '...looking at a larger-scale [then] that's kind of something that's on the burner for you all?'

Mitchell: 'Yeah [and] certainly here, if there was an opportunity to do something using private money, i.e., investment money or hedge fund money, or pension fund money, that is philosophically more comfortable for the owners of the estate than taking large amounts of public money. Now, I say that fully aware that if you look at the farm accounts for the past sixty years, we've benefitted from public money through subsidies or agri-environmental schemes [but] when we're looking forward to what we'd like to do in the future, actually, we're working on a couple of schemes with quite a well-known sort of habitat bank broker, another one with a pension fund and another couple of deals on the table which are with individual businesses. And that's because I think there's a bias towards the private sector over the public sector [but] where that then breaks down I think is when he tries to deliver stuff at scale. So we are very engaged with the local nature recovery strategy...we are seen locally as people who are influential in that land and that management space. We would like to provide part of our estates to contribute to a wider strategic goal...which has strategic biodiversity significance and water quality significance' (Mitchell 2023, 588-590).

The ability to capitalise on internal funding streams to deliver environmental objectives is an organisational advantage for the National Trust. When asked about the need for financial support in encouraging farmers to move towards sustainable farming practices, Andy Eddy noted that one of the key benefits of organisational ownership under the National Trust is an improved ability to deliver in-hand initiatives through revenue streams produced by such a large and diversified business model:

Graham: ‘...thinking about...your environmental focus...what would you say some of the benefits are as being part of the National Trust versus being independent...?’

Eddy: ‘I would say, the differences for the National Trust, it's about engagement and managing the land well, whereas...farmers, they're businesses, and their first and foremost thing has to be making enough money so that they can survive, isn't it? That's the big difference. The Trust has got money coming in [from the membership and] it already is a diversified business...which allows them to do things much, much differently’ (Eddy 2023, 813).

David Hassall expanded on this idea when asked about advantages the National Trust might have by way of its organisational model, explaining that its size is one of the principal benefits the Trust has in delivering environmental objectives:

Hassall: ‘...we have access to...commercial capital, which a lot of people wouldn't have access to. We're a multi-billion-pound organisation at the end of the day, so we can borrow quite cheaply, for commercial enterprises, we can access what we call restricted funds. We have grant specialists who look at accessing us grant funds. And...cash flow is not as big a concern from an agri-environment scheme like it would be to a small to medium enterprise. You know, we wouldn't fall in that bracket. So we do benefit in many ways. We also have really diversified teams already. So, if you were looking at putting margins into your arable fields, if you haven't got a topper to top those margins as needed, then actually, suddenly the viability of those margins suddenly drops significantly [and] we already have those to manage some of our other habitats’ (Hassall 2024, 834).

He later reiterated the relevance of scale in these instances and gave broader insight on the capacity that the National Trust and other large estates have to model these nature-based farming systems and ecologically-sensitive estate maintenance practices:

Hassall: ‘So...the National Trust [and] Holkham estate...lot of respect for both [and] there is a benefit to [that] scale, and that is things like resilience, specialism, etc, and that all feeds into demonstration and support around it. There is also a benefit to small scale, I would argue, in those systems as well...and I would like to think that there's space for both in all of that...but then it takes leaders and it takes people who are willing to take a risk and actually demonstrate these things. Everything that I've kind of been involved with has shown that the most effective communicators to farmers who are facing so much risk in their enterprises already for them to actually take a punt and change their system and take a further risk on board, [are] those bigger enterprises, people like Holkham, people like the National Trust, less so the National Trust, because we have this massive membership behind us that makes it feel [less risky], but people like Holkham and those big ones can take on that risk and show that it works and that you can make a successful system out of it. And then they have the PR machine behind it also to actually tell people’ (*Hassall 2024, 847-848*).

The bias towards arable farming landscapes regarding financial concerns and the relevance of government funding in the interviews above reflects the different uses and management regimes between estate parkland and farmland. Following from the information presented in Chapter 4.1, perspectives on parkland aesthetics have evolved among both internal stakeholders and the visiting public and ‘untidy’ manners of presentation are now increasingly standard practice. Nevertheless, as is the case with farming landscapes, the decision whether or not to take on agri-environment schemes which support that standard in historic parkland is largely financial. However, in contrast to arable farming operations for which interviewees have highlighted the inherent risk, putting estate parkland into these schemes is generally less controversial and primarily depends on whether or not the park, or more often certain areas of the park, are used for commercial operations. Sue Penlington’s insight into the decision to remove a portion of Holkham Park from their Higher Level Stewardship scheme covered in Chapter 4.1 (see page 117) demonstrates this point. As she revealed, the area of the park in question required repeated derogations from HLS oversight which does not permit dead wood clearance or intensive grass cutting and compaction (*Defra 2025d*). Consequently, in the interest of the estate’s commercial operations, it made more practical sense to remove that area of the parkland from the agri-environment scheme. Also noted above, Susan Hopkinson discussed how funding from Countryside Stewardship for sustainable parkland management was the crucial bottom line to justify those changes in management to the board of trustees at Burton Constable. Nevertheless, despite financial considerations in choosing to put historic

parkland into government schemes, the relationship between arable farming zones and government funding was notably stronger and more contentious among interview participants. As a result of the greater risks and variables at play in these landscape contexts, interviewees involved in estate farming or countryside management were much more emphatic about the importance of government support for sustainable farming strategies and habitat creation projects and were equally concerned about the reliability of these strategies long-term. As Jon Lewney (Calke Abbey) remarked, SFI (Sustainable Farming Incentive) had reshaped how his tenants and other farmers approached their business. Other interviewees noted the same (Gregory 2025; Hassall 2024; Penlington 2024), highlighting the significance of government support in transitioning to regenerative farming systems. However, concerns over the long-term reliability of agri-environmental schemes, particularly the short-term, 'tit-for-tat' payments that support the regenerative farming practices discussed in Chapter 4.2, have not been unfounded.

On 11th March 2025, Defra announced the sudden closure of applications to the Sustainable Farming Incentive which paid farmers for a broad range of environmentally sensitive practices including the historically-informed systems of herbal leys and grazed crop rotations, along with the improved arable hedgerows and field margins presented earlier. While those who have already entered into SFI agreements will continue to be honoured, new applications have been cancelled. Thus, while the government has stated that SFI will be renewed with an updated funding model (Defra 2026a), the future of regenerative and sustainable farming methods supported by SFI remains largely uncertain. A follow-up interview was held with Jon Lewney (Calke Abbey) to discuss his perspective on this unexpected change and possible implications for the future of estate landscapes. Lewney remarked that this could possibly entrench ecologically destructive conventional farming methods in light of such instability:

Graham: 'Do you think there'll be...a tangible detriment to what's been going on so far?'

Lewney: 'I think yes, there is. I don't know how much that's to do with the funding. It's probably more to do with that erosion of trust. So farmers not going into schemes because they just don't trust the government to keep to what they said they're going to do...[and] farmers being more careful and more conservative about decisions they make and taking low risk options...things that they control. So that's planting as much as they can, over-spraying, ploughing things to the field boundary' (Lewney 2025, 530).

However, the other two primary strands of England's Environmental Land Management, Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery, remain in operation, although the next round of funding applications have yet to be announced (Defra 2026b; Farming UK 2026). These

two funding streams, which are long-term agreements, from five to twenty or more years, are designed for larger, more ambitious environmental projects such as the habitat creation and rewilding schemes featured in Chapter 5 (NFU 2025). Lewney remarked that the potential erosion of trust he anticipates regarding future sustainable farming schemes may drive farmers and land managers towards these larger environmental recovery strands as more stable options. He noted how this may have a tangible impact on small farms, pushing nature recovery more prominently into larger landholdings:

Graham: ‘...in terms of these funding schemes, [are they] angling more towards the sort of larger scale landscape recovery schemes [and] pivoting away from the –’

Lewney: ‘Small farm.’

Graham: ‘Yeah.’

Lewney: ‘It’s really hard on the ground to know...[but] our head farming advisor at the Trust, is saying they’re hearing [that] Defra [is] looking at changing the way the schemes are funded and funding the most beneficial schemes, which is the larger landscape scale recovery stuff’ (Lewney 2025, 526).

Defra’s Countryside Stewardship funding scheme remains open to eligible applicants and does provide some funding for regenerative farming methodologies such as herbal leys which were included in SFI. But as opposed to SFI’s open eligibility, shorter-term contracts, flexibility, and ease of entry, Countryside Stewardship applications are competitive and more prescriptive which creates more barriers to entry. However, the arable reversion and rewilding projects mentioned above which are funded through schemes such as Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery, remain viable and enticing options for land managers, especially as these strategies avoid the high-risk commodity market of farming which is compounded by the transition to regenerative methods. Furthermore, as an interviewee pointed out above, through this ‘Knepp model’ of rewilding, these payments available to landowners for habitat creation and relevant rare breed supplements can be further financially buttressed by the integration of ecotourism offerings. Hence, for large estates, in light of SFI’s closure, these reversion options remain opportunities for private owners looking to minimise expenditure, maximise income, and mitigate risk, while at the same time putting their estate at the forefront of contemporary interests in environmental issues.

Site	Social factors/enablers	Economic factors/enablers
<i>Calke Abbey</i> (NT)	Generational changes towards environmental concerns	Agri-environmental funding
<i>Wimpole (NT)</i>	Not mentioned	Agri-environmental funding, public grants
<i>Osterley Park</i> (NT)	Generational changes towards environmental concerns	Agri-environmental funding, internal (NT) revenue streams
<i>Holkham (Ind)</i>	Generational changes towards environmental concerns, legacy	Agri-environmental funding, private funding
<i>Hatfield (Ind)</i>	Generational changes towards environmental concerns, legacy	Agri-environmental funding, private funding
<i>Mapperton</i> (Ind)	Generational changes towards environmental concerns, legacy	Agri-environmental funding
<i>Bowood (Ind)</i>	Not mentioned	Agri-environmental funding

Table 5. Review of the case study sites mentioned in Chapter 6.1. Catalysts and enablers of environmental landscape changes are listed by their associated sites in the text and organised by whether they are primarily social or economic.

Interview commentary has emphasised how changes in landscape use, especially in commercial farming contexts, ‘follow the money’ (Cove 2024a, 512; Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 326). Combined with the number of responses which highlighted the significance of parliamentary support in delivering environmental objectives, they paint a picture in which financial security takes centre stage. Generational changes, environmental sensitivities and notions of legacy are important motivating factors, but undertaking these changes in estate management is a decision which requires serious financial considerations to ensure long-term organisational sustainability, hence why large estates such as Holkham and Hatfield have engaged with or cite an interest in privately funded environmental schemes to avoid potential upsets in funding streams. However, even for these larger, commercially diversified estates or organisations such as the National Trust, the importance of government funding in achieving environmental objectives in estate contexts is substantial and further centres these historic landscapes within a wider national trajectory of culture and government policy. While uncertainties exist around the future of regenerative farming, the popularity, generally lower risk, commercial opportunities, and continued – if not increased – government support for larger habitat creation and landscape recovery schemes may drive other landed estates towards a ‘Knepp model’ of rewilding. Additionally, the economically pragmatic decision to maintain ‘untidy’ aesthetics in historic parkland, supported by greater environmental sensitivities and changing attitudes among internal and external stakeholders will most likely encourage the continued expansion of this new standard of parkland presentation, part of a wider reinterpretation of these landscapes as valuable for both human and environmental wellbeing.

Mirroring the economic and cultural factors which are driving ecological initiatives within these landscapes, shifts towards the wider parklands as a primary visitor focus are a result of a similar combination of factors. Changing cultural attitudes and recreational interests among the visiting public are reciprocally related to new, landscape-based tourism offerings which seek to generate increased visitor engagement and revenue. The following section will shed light on how revisions to the country house museum model towards the outdoors is evidence of their adaptation to an evolving cultural and political climate which strengthens the relevance of these institutions, maintains their standing as prominent visitor destinations, and contributes to their financial sustainability in a changing world.

6.2 New Perspectives and Country House Tourism

There is a contrast between contemporary management strategies and the previous model of tourism and interpretation of the country house as a heritage object which largely conformed to the art historical and nation-centred historiography of the country house reviewed in Chapter 2.3. Enquiries into these changes in country house presentation and visitor offerings opened up a broader conversation on the significance of the house's surrounding estate in these new heritage management approaches and the possible primacy of those landscapes as a visitor destination. These programmatic developments, along with changing visitor demographics and ideological shifts in the country house industry better reflect current cultural attitudes and social mores, including ideas of accessibility, inclusivity, and mental and physical wellbeing. Interview data will demonstrate how estate landscapes, particularly parklands, have proved invaluable in broadening visitor demographics, problematising the idea of the country house visit as a traditionally conservative, white, middle-class practice that underpins its relationship to the authorised heritage discourse (AHD). Furthermore, it illustrates how through the landscape, these historic estates have been able to pivot and address contemporary social challenges in a way which parallels turns towards environmental concerns in land management.

Estate Landscapes as Visitor Destinations

In the *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (2016), Vagnone & Ryan level significant criticisms against the formulaic museological presentation of historic houses that has persisted in the industry for decades. Although they wrote from a North American perspective and notable differences exist between the American house museum network and that of the British country house industry (Young 2016), manners of presentation and visiting which adhere to themes central to the AHD (Smith 2016, 6-8) frequently remain consistent:

‘All too often, [historic house museums] are places where a well-intended docent points at obscure portraits, and gestures into barren rooms while sharing a seemingly fact-based, exclusive narrative about the great deeds of the great, white man who once lived in the home. There are few actual signs of habitation or the complexity of family life, and any opportunity for a shared, meaningful, and human connection across generations disappears in the stark museum atmosphere’ (Ryan & Vagnone 2014, 97-98).

One of the primary catalysts for Vagnone and Ryan’s polemic against the house museum industry in the United States was a recognition that they were suffering from dwindling attendance, an aging visitor demographic and related issues of financial insecurity (Vagnone & Ryan 2014, 38-39). They, along with others (Turino & van Balgooy 2019; Graham 2014; Freedom du Lac 2012; Moe 2012), have argued for a paradigm shift, recommending that house museums must find new ways to engage with the public and ensure their relevance to wider communities. Illustrated at the outset of this work, in contrast to what many stakeholders and heritage professionals working in American house museums see as a dire situation, the country house tourism industry in England holds strong, receiving the greatest share of visitors among historic sites in the country (BVA-BDRC 2025). Over 1,400 member properties of Historic Houses receive in excess of 21 million visitors a year (Historic Houses 2023a), and nine of the top ten visited National Trust sites are country houses or country house parks, with nearly 4.5 million visitors to those nine sites between 2024 and 2025 (National Trust 2025a). In light of this trans-Atlantic discrepancy and a general consistency between interpretive models in historic house museologies, this raised questions about the degree to which the outdoor elements of these historic estates support such high levels of public engagement over a conventional historic house museum visit.

Smith’s (2006) enquiry into the social values of the country house identified the visit as a process which creates and maintains a nostalgic, socially deferential, white middle-class British identity, an assessment which has since been reinforced (Donington 2023a, 143; Smith 2021; Fowler 2020, 127; Smith 2016; Bressley 2013). Interviews conducted for this research have addressed this traditional model of the country house tour and questioned its contemporary relevance, long-term sustainability, and significance to sustained visitor appeal. The interrogation of this museological model opened up broader conversations about the value of estate parkland as a visitor offer and the country seat’s wider natural environment as the dominant tourist destination. When asked about what the primary attractions for visitors to Burton Constable might be, Susan Hopkinson, the charity’s director, reflected:

Hopkinson: ‘...if you look at our visitors, the park is open all year round, which the house isn't, so it's going to be a bit distorted anyway...but I actually surprised myself because 50% of visitors over a year do visit the house. Now in previous houses I've worked [it] has been around 18%. It's been much lower. And especially we've started our own membership scheme – this is the third year. And the members...don't visit the house each time they come. They tend to maybe visit once if there's a new exhibition on or they might come at Christmas when the house is decorated or they've got friends staying they'll show them, but otherwise they are very much using the grounds. So you've got that whole contingent of members who some of them just want to walk the dog...’ (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 314-315).

It can be difficult to assess the ratio of visitors to house versus parkland depending on the pay structure for a particular property. For example, reportedly 80% of visitors to Hardwick visit the



Figure 94 Visitors inside the kitchen at Holkham Hall

house, but with numerous porous entries to the estate, visitors are able to access the parkland free of charge (Sadler & Dillon 2023). However, the priority of parkland over the house as the core visitor attraction was cited by several properties consulted in this research where such visitor statistics were available from interviewees. Of the eleven estates, eight were able to provide visitor statistics data, for which five properties reported up to 30% of site visitors entered the house. At Burton Constable, the figure is 50% but Hopkinson acknowledges that is unusually high within the industry. Even including Hardwick's probable overestimation considering their freely accessible parkland, across properties which provided statistical data, an average of only 37% of visitors enter the house and the parkland rather than the parkland alone.

Conversations regarding how visitors use the house and formal gardens and/or the parkland, shed light on distinctions in visitor demographics. Interviewees reflected on these changing demographics away from 'traditional' visitor profiles towards a primary visitor base characterised by families who are typically less interested in the house museum offering that dominated previous forms of country house presentation. At Calke Abbey, Jon Lewney, who has worked at other National Trust properties including Hardwick Hall and Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, discussed these demographic profiles across the Trust:

Lewney: '...we used to have visitor makeups, and I quite liked the way they were phrased. So we used to have these "curious mind visitors" and there was a bit of a role profile of what they'd look like and they were kind of sixty to seventy, retirees...maybe campervan, driving around the country, checking out all the National Trust properties, really interested in detail. They loved all the history side...the British colonial: "weren't we great as a British colonial power." They love that sort of side of things. And they love to kind of revel in that former glory and talk about the family members who lived here... And then we had these young families...[called] explorer families [who wanted to] kick a ball around they wanted to pick up a pasty or a sandwich, if they were gonna have anything at all they'd bring a picnic...they wanted a cheap grab and go sort of offer. Whereas the retirees would want cream tea, sit down, it didn't matter if it cost twenty quid, they were happy because they were getting this premium experience' (Rasen & Lewney 2023, 418-419).

This disparity between traditional models of country house touring that have prioritised artistic and historical significance and an interest in the outdoors among families and children was touched on by Susan Hopkinson (Burton Constable). At the time of research, the Burton Constable Foundation had recently undertaken survey work to create a blueprint for future growth in visitor numbers and long-term financial security. When discussing other properties which have pivoted towards increased investment in estate parkland relative to traditional forms of docent-led artistic, architectural, and historic interpretation, Hopkinson revealed similar insights:

Hopkinson: 'It's really interesting, because that sort of mirrors debates the trustees have been having about the future sustainability of Burton Constable and particularly financial sustainability. And we undertook...a lottery funded, resilient heritage bid [and] we looked at an audience development strategy and they interviewed users, non-users, it was really the biggest sort of piece of research we'd really done...to give some really

robust evidence...for the trustees to be able to make those decisions that are a big investment for them.... And the thing that that really came out of that research was about the family offer, and that there wasn't enough for families. That we needed a playground, along the lines of things like Skelf Island at Castle Howard, Plotters' Forest at Raby. Things that are bespoke, so they reflect the history of the house, the grounds...rather than just being an adventure playground, they're telling a story, and you can do a whole events program around it. And so you can imagine that for the trustees...it's their remit to do what is best for the foundation, they look at the objects of the charity [which] say that it's to preserve Burton Constable and open to the public and the people who come and visit the house are perfectly happy with the product.... But for people with two preschool children, it's quite a big ask to walk around thirty rooms of a stately home even when we put dressing up in it and we put "have tea with a dragon." ...there were times in my life, much as I love country houses, where my husband stayed with the push chair and the children and I went looked around the house and we didn't take the children around it because I just didn't want somebody with a blue rinse on and a twinset and pearls to be shushing at my children' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 312).

Sue Penlington had a similar commentary concerning historic house touring as lacking both popular appeal and its limitations with respect to repeat visits:

Penlington: '...you visit a stately home once...and then do you want to go back again and again and again? But if you come and you walk the dog, or if you come in the autumn, and then in the spring...we have more repeat visits for the outdoor spaces, definitely. And you know, I've got a six-year-old son, would I want to take him around a stately home when he was two and be terrified that he was going to knock something off the shelf or – it's just the traditional stately home visit...was quite niche' (Penlington 2023, 634)

Hopkinson and Penlington's observation about the inaccessibility of country house museums for families gives credence to the model's outdatedness observed by North American commentators cited above (Vagnone & Ryan 2016; Ryan & Vagnone 2014). Moreover, the survey data that emphasised offerings for outdoor recreational spaces, particularly for families, was also expressed by other research participants. Kath Knight, Deputy CEO at Harewood House revealed that a focus on family visitors will be central to their growth and development strategy with specific attention given to outdoor spaces relative to the house itself:

Graham: ‘...have you seen maybe a changing demographic, a little more interest in the outdoor space from people...?’

Knight: ‘Yeah, so in terms of our visitors...about 30% go into the house. The rest are obviously enjoying the grounds, the play area, we have a very high family audience, and we have a membership scheme as well [with] about 35,000 members and the majority of those are family members. So, in terms of our programming, we are trying to build on that’.

Graham: ‘some of the other places that I've talked with [have noticed] a change in terms of, say from the 1980s or 90s, early 2000s, of the typical visitor to now where the...big...demographic...is families...and that for them the landscape has really been the space in which they can capitalize on that. Has that been kind of a similar approach for you...?’

Knight: ‘I think it's very much been our emphasis these last eighteen months...and...we're going to be investing in that over the next year. So...in terms of timeline, the play area will actually be phase one, so looking to install a new play area to open next summer. So that was the first thing and that was a conscious decision because of that family audience...’ (Knight 2023, 567-568).

Like the redevelopment plan at Harewood that focuses on restored landscapes with increased offerings for children and families, Lee Hitchcock, General Manager of Holkham Enterprises, discussed changes in their visitor growth strategy since her tenure at Holkham estate began in 2013:

Hitchcock: ‘...certainly the visitor growth strategy that...I've been aware of has been very much around the parkland...we've really shifted from being a museum almost that people would come and visit and we had a whole bygones museum, people looked at old equipment and things. And we've really pushed it much more into having bikes for people to hire, having a ropes course. A lot of our...investments...have been in that kind of outside family offer. And certainly when we look forward to what will our investment strategy be for the next ten years in my area, it will be about family, it's likely to be play based...’ (Hitchcock 2023, 609-610).



Figure 95. Children's play area at Holkham (author's photo)

While conducting interview research with Alexa Buffey, House & Collections Manager at Beningbrough Hall, the house had very recently reopened in July 2023 after a two-year renovation project. A minimal decrease in visitor numbers during that period was evidence of the value of its park and gardens as primary destinations:

Graham: ‘...comparing the visitor numbers between when the house was open, and when the house was closed, there was a relatively minimal impact.... So, 2018 to 2019...there were 146,111 visitors. And then in 2021 to 2022, it was 122,053. So, there's only about an 18% difference...so that kind of got me thinking about...the value of these spaces in terms of the outdoors [and] ...the way that people use them as spaces to get outside.’

Buffey: ‘...the team here were pretty pleased with how the numbers held up, we kind of predicted massive drops in attendance.... I'll say...it's sort of fairly anecdotal, because we've only been open for three weeks since we reopened the hall [but] quite a large proportion of the visitors come into the house, like higher than I've experienced in other houses. So it's at least 50%, quite a few days it's been sort of 80%, which is unusually high, but then we have just reopened and I think it's a bit of a novelty and we've had some rainy days and people are more likely to go inside. So although you get that proportion, I still think a big part of the attraction here is the outdoors’ (Buffey 2023, 270-271).

Discussions around primary visitor attractions and demographics at Beningbrough expanded to include the aims and investment directives of the Trust more broadly which were consistent with other participant insights into the significance of landscape in current estate management plans:

Graham: 'With the closure of the house, what do you think was the biggest draw for people when the house wasn't an option? Or even when the house has been an option, what do you think is...the big driver for visits?'

Buffey: 'I think certainly with our family audience here, we've got a big outdoor playground. And that is a massive thing for families...they can come, they can be quite relaxed, they can sort of let their kids get on with it. They can get a coffee from the cafe, which is next door. That kind of fairly unstructured, I suppose, visit, but they sort of feel they've got the safety to let their kids explore and enjoy nature and be somewhere like this that isn't like a municipal park as an alternative...I'd say that over my time with the Trust over the last ten years that's something that's increased massively, and you see a lot more of a bigger proportion of the sort of people that want to come into that.'

Graham: 'So do you think that...this has been a trend that's been going for some time in terms of growing demand for outdoor spaces for families?'

Buffey: 'Yeah, I think so.... I think in terms of the National Trust strategy, there has undoubtedly been a massive shift towards the land, outdoors, and nature part of the strategy. I wouldn't say necessarily away from house and collections, but they've become a sort of less central part to the National Trust...maybe that's not quite what I mean, but...you hear a bit more noise about land, outdoors, and nature...that's where a lot of the innovation seems to be taking place. And...it seems to me that that's something that will continue into the next ten years. I know the Trust at the moment is sort of starting to write its strategy for 2025 for the following ten years. And I get the sense that that will...continue' (Buffey 2023, 272-273).

In addition to standard outdoor offerings such as walking and cycling trails and other forms of nature-based leisure, recent National Trust programming strategies reflect interviewee responses, showing a stronger emphasis on family and children's activities in estate parkland. Since 2012, they have promoted their '50 things to do before you're 11^{3/4}', which encourages children to engage in nature-based activities either at Trust properties or elsewhere, including building a den, foraging for wild food or bird watching (National Trust n.d.l). Often tied to this

initiative is their 'Summer of Play' (Figure 96), which involves pop-up venues at participating locations with events and activities to encourage outdoor play and exploration.



Figure 96. Visitors to Hardwick during a Summer of Play event (author's photo)

The significance of these changes to visitor demographics and the corresponding developments in visitor offerings on the estate lies in its departure from the aesthetically-driven house tour model which England's country houses adopted since they first opened their doors and became embedded in the nation's heritage canon (Young 2016, 225-226). This turn towards estate parkland for a growing audience of young families reflects the limited appeal of the traditional country house tour observed by Penlington (Penlington 2023, 634) and Hopkinson (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 312). While efforts have been made at some country house sites to engage a broader demographic within the house through more inclusive exhibits and interpretation (National Trust n.d.a; Knight 2023, 572), research participants touched on what can be understood as a degree of inaccessibility for a wider audience within the house museum experience. This demonstrates a fundamental difference between the country house and its park in heritage tourism contexts in which the historic designed landscapes of the estate are better suited to address contemporary concerns of accessibility, diversity, and inclusivity. This capacity is derived from what this research has interpreted as a greater sense of 'cultural neutrality' within the park, where visitors are free to engage with these landscapes on their own terms, distanced from the cultural and historic meanings expressed more explicitly in the house and its collections.

Parklands, Accessibility and Inclusivity

Alexa Buffey's response to the parkland as a primary attraction for families mentioned practical considerations of safety and accessibility as being important factors in how estate parkland might accommodate more diverse audiences. While discussing the bias towards the outdoors among visitors to Calke Abbey, Caroline Taylor, Visitor Operations and Experience Manager and Jon Lewney noted the significance of these historic estates in terms of providing safe and accessible forms of outdoor recreation:

Taylor: '...only about 20% of our visitors go in the house, majority [of] people come for the outdoors experiences. So there's an element of catering for that audience. Because it's a really key audience...but then also, in doing so we increase our outdoor offer, and that encourages more people to go [and] it's thinking about how we can increase access. So the trails are really important for those people who require a little bit of parameter within their visit...they can just get on, walk, follow. And there's something about [the] National Trust experience that feels quite safe for some people, I think so you can get outside, explore nature in the countryside, without worrying about having to call mountain rescue or whatever else is going on. So yes, the walking trails have been established for a number of years, and then we look at how we can share accessibility information relevant to that and where we can improve some of those...the Tramway Trail...was extended in partnership with Sport England [and] it's suitable and popular for walkers, dog walkers, cyclists and wheelchair users, mobility scooters and alike as well. It's also relatively good throughout the year as an all-weather surface so that's really helped us improve our access to the outdoors for everybody who comes to Calke. And then you sort of use that as a springboard and that very much then led to the development of Calke Explore (Figure 97) and our outdoors hub there.'

Lewney: ‘And our properties open you up, I think...not just ours, but the private ones as well. They open you up to a range of experiences. So, grandma, and granddad can do this and that bit. Mum and dad will like this, but the kids will love to run around here. Yeah, there's a little bit of something for everybody which is really helpful. It's really, I think what Caroline said about the safe spaces to be outdoors is really, really key...I've not really thought about [it] until you said it, but actually it is. It's like a safety net of “we can do this, we can let the kids roam free. You know, the dog can be here, and we'll be safe”...so there is an element of being a bit more relaxed when you're in this environment’ (Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 390-391).



Figure 97. Calke Explore is a Calke's new outdoor hub with facilities and car parking meant to make it easier and more convenient to use Calke Park and the wider estate for outdoor leisure (author's photo)

Susan Hopkinson and Dave Nassau at Burton Constable also discussed safety as an appealing element for families visiting estate parkland and referenced its value for retaining repeat visitors:

Hopkinson: ‘...when [going] back to places, it's to do the walks again...maybe won't go in the house again...but it will be because [of] those walks and it's a very safe environment, very accessible environment...you do feel like [you can] let go of your children's hand and let them run on ahead of you. And I think that that's a lot of the attraction for visiting country houses with families...’

Nassau: ‘...a week ago, we was working down here, and these two young ladies came up with a little girl in a pushchair and obviously the little girl had some sort of handicap. I

don't quite know what, and they came rocking up, "excuse me, anywhere where we can let the little girl out and just run freely, you know, where she's safe?" "Just go through that gate there on the field. Feel free." "You don't mind?" "No, please!" After about two hours, she came back and there was sweat pourin' off her. "Thank you so much. Thank you." (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 317, 335-336)

Another critical factor of what interviewees reported as a draw for visitors to the outdoors is a greater potential for inclusivity within parkland landscapes. During consultation, some research participants recognised the long-standing association of stately home touring as a white, middle-class practice, mirroring academic analyses cited above. However, they also noted substantial trends away from this cultural stereotype in more current visitor profiles. Jon Lewney reflected on this socio-cultural association but reported a shift towards a broader class affiliation among visitor populations to National Trust properties, although he acknowledged extant issues related to other demographic factors in their visitor make-up at Calke:

*Lewney: '...when I started with the trust in 2000, our visitor make-up if you went into our car park at Killerton, it was generally Land Rover, BMW, Volvo. That was pretty much...75% of our cars in the car park were that. Hunter wellies, Barbour jackets, black Labrador. That was our visitor make-up. Now when you come into our car park, everybody comes...but not everybody comes from a diversity point of view...we're right at the edge of Leicester, we've got a huge Hindu and Muslim population in Leicester. We do get some visitors [from those communities], but not of the proportions that I'd expect for our closeness to those conurbations... And so that customer base of those white middle-class people in their Hunter wellies and their Barbour jackets, they're part of our membership, you know, we don't want to lose them. It's not saying just because you're this kind of person, we don't want you anymore, it's thinking about how do we engage you *and* all these people?' (Rasen & Lewney 2023, 415)*

Considering the often-problematic histories of domestic and imperial exploitation of stately homes and possible negative interpretations among the public, this research was interested in the idea that the absence of conspicuous material affluence and ostentatious portraiture in naturalistic parkland landscapes compared to the grander architectural and artistic statements of the house might facilitate or invite a broader demographic and provide a more inclusive visitor experience. Located on the edge of Hounslow borough in London, Osterley Park (Figure 98) is a compelling example of how these spaces can better engage with 'non-traditional'

demographics outside the white, middle-class visitor profile through its principal function as local amenity green space:

Graham: ‘...of those people who are coming for the parkland, would you say most of those are probably local, or relatively local?’

Eddy: ‘Absolutely. This is their local London park. A lot of the people haven't heard of the National Trust, have no interest in the National Trust, and think that it's paid for by Hounslow council or their council tax payments, and actually, that's absolutely fine. There's no need for them to visit the house or the café...they come in and use the park, they come in summer evenings, have barbecues and what not, and that's fine.... I mean, [what] the Trust is trying to do is have these green spaces for people, their wellness and wellbeing, and actually all the time that Osterley's been...going it's been people's local park.’

Graham: ‘...my understanding as well...[is] Hounslow is quite a diverse borough.’

Eddy: ‘Very much so. I mean, what's really interesting is that...virtually all the people who work at Osterley have white faces, and nearly all our visitors and park users have brown faces, because we're a predominantly Asian, South Asian area...that's just the makeup.’

Graham: ‘Something that I was interested in is this idea that, in many ways, the wider estate lands, the wider parkland, the potential that it has to be a bit more of a neutral space. So in compared to a house museum experience, which has much more clear associations with [its] historical context, or...political associations, that outdoors, you might find a more diverse crowd.’

Eddy: ‘You're absolutely right, because we, culturally, the middle classes in this country are brought up, they take their children to visit these places, [it's] one of the things we do. All the people who use our park, don't have that background, they don't know about visiting houses, they don't know what it means to visit a house, they might not be interested in visiting a house. And so it's a completely different thing’ (Eddy 2023, 806-807).



Figure 98. Visitors at Osterley Park (author's photo)

Eddy's observation on the cultural and ethnic dichotomy between the house and parkland at Osterley encapsulates this idea of neutrality within country house parks and speaks to the diverse purposes that these landscapes can serve. As he demonstrates, despite the cultural connotations of these country estates, they can fulfil local needs regardless of the demographic makeup of its immediate community and challenges ideas of inherent exclusivity in country house visiting through the recreational value of its landscape. As Eddy points out, this is 'their local London park', which invites speculation as to whether Calke Abbey's visitor makeup would reflect greater ethnic diversity if it was situated directly within those communities rather than simply within driving distance.

The story of the Lascelles family of Harewood House is deeply embedded with the histories of slavery and colonialism, the wealth of their engagement in the Atlantic slave trade funding the construction of the current house and grounds (Finch 2020, 75-76). As one of England's Treasure Houses, its Palladian architecture, neo-classical interior, Chippendale furniture and colonial history exemplify the British country house cliché. Consequently, the difficult legacy of the estate and overwhelming expressions of wealth and privilege have sometimes led to discomfort among certain groups which the Harewood House Trust has worked to redress through more transparent and inclusive programming initiatives. While Harewood's Brownian landscape park can speak to corresponding forms of elite taste for those who can read it, discussions around the idea of cultural neutrality within estate parkland relative to the house

itself yielded similar insights to conversations elsewhere regarding house and parkland visitor make-ups:

Graham: ‘Do you think as well...thinking about some of the cultural associations [or] stereotypes or the assumptions about...a traditional country house tour, that...for Harewood House with the association with the slave trade...do you think in some way the wider landscape provides a little more of a neutral space that...people can fit into where maybe they don't feel necessarily as much of a part of that...house story?’

Knight: ‘Yeah. I mean, you only need to go into the house and look at the people in there. That is still a very traditional, historic house audience. And, you know, we get group tours, but again, you can probably predict the type of group that have been coming in on those. And the other side of that is that we know that the house can trigger emotion, and particularly for the West African communities and people of colour visiting, we've had people that have known the history of the house, but have entered the house and then had a very strong emotional reaction to that. So...that's partly why we're doing so much with the community outreach, and sort of talking to those groups. And we have a program called Hidden Histories [so that]...people of colour have visibility within the house. So we now have a programme of portraits of people of colour [with] David Harewood the actor that's opening next week...and of course, his surname is because his family were slaves of the Lascelles. So yeah...that's, I think, why a lot of people don't go in the house’ (Knight 2023, 572).

As part of Harewood's landscape development project, they are also planning a shift in the payment scheme, with ticketing being required for the house visit, but not the parkland in an attempt to broaden their prospective visitor demographics and improve engagement with more diverse audiences:

Knight: ‘The other critical thing actually, which is key to this [landscape] project, [is] we're moving the pay barrier. So...you buy your ticket at the moment at a hut on the drive, [so if you] come in, you've got a barrier.’

Graham: ‘...as a charitable trust which is doing things for public benefit, is some of this as well...creating [outdoor spaces] for people?’

Knight: ‘Yeah, yeah, and I think, I mean it's a balance between, yes, we're a charitable trust. But we also have to run as a business because we have to be financially sustainable. You know, we have to charge an admission price to come in and we have to

make sure that people feel that represents good value. But then there is the debate about, well, that's all well and good, but what about the people that can't afford to come in? So some of those communities we're working with in North Leeds, probably can't afford our admission price or a day or full day out at Harewood. So how can we accommodate those? So I think...by moving the pay barrier, it actually gives people another option of being able to just park up and for a very small fee, you know, £5 for a car or something...they can then go and enjoy the estate' (Knight 2023, 569-570).

While the communities around Holkham in North and West Norfolk contain minimal ethnic diversity, much of the surrounding rural areas suffer from significant levels of deprivation (JSNA 2025). At Holkham, moving the pay barrier to the house and formal gardens concurrent with an increased investment in outdoor offerings facilitated a widening of the visitor demographics away from the 'traditional' house tour visitor towards a more inclusive focus on families from diversified socio-economic brackets:

Penlington: 'I'd say 2014 to 2015...we really started to up the ante. So, we put in a kid's woodland play area, which is free, so all you have to do is come and pay and park and that literally changed the visitor profile pretty much overnight' (Penlington 2023, 632).

Lee Hitchcock expanded on the significance of Holkham's freely accessible parkland:

Hitchcock: 'Our pay barrier is either to go into an attraction like the hall or the walled garden, but the parkland is free, you can walk in...it is a pay to park but the pay to park charge for £5 for a family will be quite low compared to how much you would pay in other areas. So we've always had that sense of inclusivity around the community and our visitors and having an offer that really suits all budgets and you can spend as little or as much as you want.... I think we've just made sure that people are aware that you can do that...essentially the park is open every day.... I think it's been part of Lord Leicester's – he's always wanted [that], that's really mattered to him that local people and visitors can access and enjoy the space and share the space that we have here' (Hitchcock 2023, 608-609).

In 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), revised their definition of a museum to include new key mission objectives which reflect contemporary issues in political ideology and cultural policy. This revised definition states that moving forwards, museums must be 'accessible and inclusive', 'foster diversity and sustainability' and operate with the 'participation of communities' (ICOM 2022, 12). England's country houses that are open to the visiting public

for purposes of heritage tourism do not generally refer to themselves as ‘museums’ (Young 2016, 205). However, many National Trust and Historic Houses properties are registered as accredited museums, including all five Trust-owned country house sites consulted for this research (Arts Council 2026), along with Harewood House and Burton Constable Hall (Harewood n.d.c; Peart 2020). Moreover, according to Leigh Hitchcock, general manager of Holkham Enterprises, these museological directives are ‘still relevant’ even for houses such as Holkham which remain privately-owned commercial enterprises with heritage tourism components (Hitchcock 2023, 613). Consequently, even in instances where a site is not registered as a museum, these new mission objectives set out by ICOM are applicable to a wide range of contemporary country houses and interviews have shed light on how vital the wider landscapes of the house are in achieving these aims across Trust-owned and independent properties. Considering the restricted audience that a country house tour traditionally appeals to, in meeting these new political ideologies and cultural values highlighted in ICOM’s revised definition, these historic parklands are critical. From Burton Constable to Calke Abbey, Osterley Park, Holkham or Harewood, these estate landscapes have become platforms to address the needs of a wider public and cater to a variety of people of differing physical and mental abilities, ages, ethnicities, and economic status. Moreover, as shown above, these estates are increasingly seeing themselves as embedded within their wider community and are seeking opportunities to engage with the populations which surround them, particularly in terms of connecting with those demographics which have typically not been part of a primary country house visiting audience. In doing so, these estates have begun to utilise these historic landscapes to address current issues of human health and wellbeing.

Landscapes and Wellbeing

In addition to greater priorities of access and inclusion, a recognition of the value of natural spaces for the preservation or restoration of physical and mental health has been identified as encouraging interpretive and programmatic emphasis on estate parkland in country house visiting models. Musson (2018, 241) argues that although country houses have served a variety of functions, it is the pursuit of pleasure which remains ‘one of the great linking themes throughout history’. These historic landscapes have retained their formative and historic purposes as restorative arcadian retreats, but have generally opened themselves to a wider public who would have formerly been excluded (Stone 1991). Backed by a rapidly growing body of evidence on the value of natural environments for human health and wellbeing (Järekar *et al.* 2025; Geary *et al.* 2023; Pritchard *et al.* 2019), many country houses have integrated this appeal

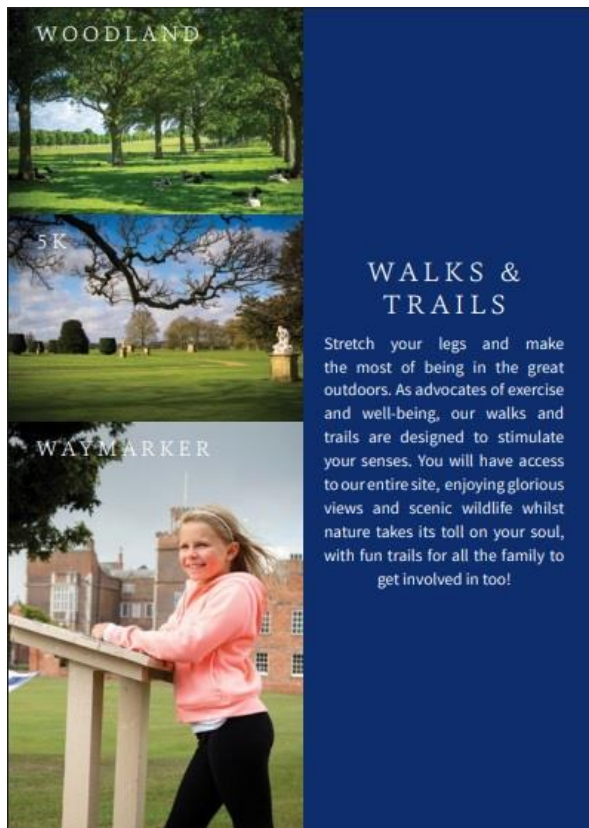


Figure 99. Walking trail guide from Burton Constable Hall

to mental and physical welfare into their visitor engagement strategies (Figure 99). Moreover, this relationship between nature and human health is complemented by emerging research which indicates a positive correlation between heritage sites and human wellbeing (Sayer 2024; Sofaer *et al.* 2021; Darvil *et al.* 2019; Taçon & Baker 2019). Therefore, as spaces which lie at the intersection of heritage and the natural environment, these estate landscapes are uniquely suited to addressing contemporary challenges of mental and physical ill health in human populations.

In their mission statement, Haddon Hall, a privately-owned medieval manor house and estate in Derbyshire sets out their objective to ‘create a paradise of rich biodiversity...a

sanctuary of well-being for man and nature alike’ (Haddon Hall n.d.). Mapperton estate claims the same, their mission summarised as ‘wellbeing through connection with heritage, nature and community’ (Mapperton 2025). In addition to advocating for environmental sustainability on behalf of their member properties, Historic Houses cites mental and physical wellbeing as one of their core organisational tenets (Historic Houses 2025). The National Trust, in keeping with the founding mission of nature conservation and access espoused by its co-founder Octavia Hill, has placed this symbiotic relationship between human wellbeing and the natural environment at the heart of their twenty-first-century development blueprint. In 2020, the Trust published a research report in partnership with the University of Derby’s Nature Connectedness Research group to better understand the significance of nature access to human health and wellbeing (National Trust 2020). Their findings, which support the positive relationship between nature and human wellbeing, have been part of this increased emphasis in their long-term strategies. In their 2025-2035 action plan, nature access for the express purpose of improving individual and population health is one of three key aims (National Trust 2025c).

In considering this idea of historic estate landscapes as spaces for health-promoting recreation, Susan Hopkinson (Burton Constable) discussed her work in a previous post as well

as more general changes in how owners and stakeholders might perceive the value of these outdoor spaces today:

Hopkinson: 'I was immediately before here at Normanby Hall which is in North Lincolnshire, which is a regency house with 350 acres of parkland.... It was different in that...[since the 1960s] the ethos behind it, much more so than the house...[was] that you come out and you're in fresh air and do things that are good for your health. People didn't particularly think of your mental health but that was definitely another benefit of it, not just your physical health as we know and we can evidence now. [It was] fairly forward thinking in that it was important to give people a green space.... And so it's quite interesting now that we've sort of woken up and said "[Burton Constable] is a fantastic place for your health and wellbeing...but that's very recent' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 293).

Kath Knight at Harewood House raised the idea of health and wellbeing in relation to their long-term development plans:

Knight: '...we have a capital fundraising strategy. And obviously, there's a whole raft of funding opportunities that we'll be looking at. And that will be everything from the sort of ecology and biodiversity angle through to wellbeing. And of course, there's so much about the benefit of being in the outdoors for health and wellbeing. So, we're very much looking at that angle as well' (Knight 2023, 566).

When queried about Holkham's incorporation of mental and physical health promotion into their facilities and programming such as their community Wellbeing Walks on the third Thursday of each month during colder seasons, Sue Penlington, who previously served as the estate's Education Manager, outlined how critical this restorative capacity of the estate is to their core mission:

Penlington: '...I think [it's] sort of important to note, certainly before COVID...we were already doing a lot of that and before really this kind of wellbeing kind of mental health agenda. I, with my [education] background, know that access to the environment is amazing for you. And, you know, you see changes in kids' behaviour, and I'm a passionate conservationist, so I was really supportive of getting people out and about, and I think it's fantastic now that everyone is aware of that' (Penlington 2023, 635).

Regarding contemporary shifts away from the conventional historic house museum towards the landscape in tourism models, Jon Lewney (Calke Abbey) highlighted a greater cultural

awareness of the link between mental wellbeing and the environment, but acknowledged the significance of financial factors in this transition towards the landscape at the National Trust:

Lewney: 'Some of that is financially driven...how can we use these spaces to engage with more people so that we can make more money and look after them better.... Some of it's driven by culture and trends in culture...we've really started to talk about mental health...we haven't got to the nitty gritty of how we solve these things, but we do know that if you put your hands in soil, you feel better. If you're in touch with nature, you hear birdsong, you feel better' (Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 398-399).

Alexa Buffey (Beningbrough Hall) mirrored the sentiments of other interviewees, commenting on the continually evolving nature of these multi-faceted rural retreats with interesting contrasts between historic propensities towards exclusion and contemporary redirects towards inclusivity:

Graham: '...do you think part of the value in places like Beningbrough, [or] country houses as a whole, [that] some of the value that might lie in the capacity to be mentally and physically restorative places...where you can kind of disconnect...to get away from... the hustle and bustle of busy urban life...do you think that's a really a key part of this experience?'

Buffey: 'Yeah, yeah, I do...and the house meant so many different things to different people over the years, whether it was status symbol, family home...a country retreat for somebody to live a very sort of country social lifestyle, to now being a place of leisure. And it's interesting to think about, for example, Giles Earle was the owner back in the...early nineteenth century, he didn't want anybody on the land...went to great lengths to keep people out of the estate... And now it's...the opposite. We want to think about how we can give people as much access as possible...I think that's an interesting, bigger story, isn't it, about what the country house has meant to people over the years and how they connect to the outdoors that surrounds them' (Buffey 2023, 278).

This idea of historically exclusive estate landscapes now opening up to a broader public audience was discussed with Claire Kingston at Mapperton. She noted an increased focus on this aspect of their management strategy, highlighting the relationship between the outdoors and wellbeing, relating it back to the significance of generational change in transitioning towards this new, wellbeing-focused estate:

Graham: 'I'm curious to know...what you think about that idea of a once elite space that's [now] open and inviting to the general public?'

Kingston: 'Embracing everyone, I think it's a good thing. And over the years, we've seen Mapperton change. So...just before I started at Mapperton [in 2015], the house and gardens were certainly only open for a small slice of the year, that's since increased. And again, that was a generational thing as well...the next generation wanting to open it up more. And...having these wonderful, amazing spaces available to people to go and explore and open their heads and just forget daily life...it's so good for our mental wellbeing and health [and] opening up Mapperton and the wider landscape fitted hand in hand with the owners' aspirations and their thoughts as well on health and wellbeing...Julie's practiced her yoga at Mapperton for a good number of years and she's got [her YouTube channel]...it all just sits hand in hand at Mapperton' (Kingston 2025, 767-768).

Referenced above, Haddon Hall's mission statement of serving as a 'sanctuary of wellbeing for man and nature alike', was mentioned by the author during on-site research at Calke Abbey, to which Caroline Taylor related back to Calke:

Taylor: 'I think we saw that in lockdown with people who wanted to come out and escape and get out in the outdoors. So yeah, we tried to do a bit of programming that focuses on wellbeing and that sort of connectivity with nature. But as Jon mentioned earlier, as well, there's a real...particularly the local communities, there's a sense of emotional connection of ownership to Calke, that Calke is theirs, because they like to pop in and just go off for a quiet walk and take in the bluebells or go sit in the bird hide for a while and there's just a little pocket of escape at Calke that I think is really important to a lot of people' (Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 397).

With many of these estates being dependent upon volunteers to maintain operations, some have utilised this need to provide opportunities to promote mental and physical wellbeing through socially-engaging volunteering projects in estate parklands. At Burton Constable, Susan Hopkinson remarked on the mental health benefits which they have seen experienced among their garden volunteers:

Hopkinson: '...some of the work that we do with volunteering...is really fulfilling a real social benefit, whether we're tackling loneliness or tackling mental ill health, particularly

Dave's garden volunteers, that's such a benefit for mental health' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 335).

As part of Mapperton's rewilding project, *Mapperton Wildlands*, the estate has incorporated a 'social prescribing' initiative in partnership with local healthcare providers which refers patients for nature-based volunteering on the estate as part of the overall volunteering programme. Mapperton is one instance of a wider strategy at NHS England, referred to as 'green social prescribing' which seeks to improve the mental and physical health of individuals in need through impactful connections with nature (NHS England n.d.; Kingston 2025, 759; Rewilding Britain 2022). Interestingly, mirroring an increased interest in the outdoors rather than the house among the visiting public, Andy Eddy (Osterley Park) noted a similar shift among volunteers who are now less interested in taking on the traditional role as a house guide:

Eddy: '...I don't know whether the model for house visiting is sustainable anymore, simply because we can't get the volunteers now that are interested in standing in those rooms, which we need a certain amount each day just to be safe, fire-wise, enough for evacuating people. It's not that people don't want to visit those buildings, [it's that] all the volunteers we get now want to work outside' (Eddy 2023, 824).

The wider landscapes of these historic estates, particularly their parklands, are vital to their adaptation to evolving cultural attitudes, political ideologies, and the needs of a changing world. In addition to the means by which these landscapes have become central to addressing contemporary issues of climate change and biodiversity loss discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, these historic estates have become important in addressing issues of physical and mental wellbeing. In doing so, these spaces have shifted away from a past-focused form of static heritage preservation towards conservation philosophy which positions itself within contemporary issues of sustainable socio-ecological futures (Harrison *et al.* 2020b, 5-6; Butler 2006, 423). Evidenced by the foregoing interviews, these outdoor-focused management strategies have allowed these heritage sites to incorporate contemporary concerns of inclusivity, accessibility, diversity, and physical and mental health in a way that is generally more challenging for the country house museum. Nassau's (Burton Constable) anecdote about how these landscapes have provided safe, accessible green spaces for individuals with disabilities (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 317, 335-336) is a tangible example of the emotional and affective experience of heritage landscapes (Tolia-Kelly, Waterton and Watson 2018; Waterton 2014). These embodied forms of use actively contest the discursive nature of traditional, education-centred heritage preservation and engagement (Hoare 2020, 1-2). Furthermore, Waterton's

(2010 8-9, 13) assessment that the inclusion of ‘diversity tropes’ does not inherently undo the influence of authorised heritage discourses in heritage management is evidenced in practice by Knight’s observation on the ‘traditional’ house-visiting audience despite the presence of more representational exhibitions. However, the increased diversity within parkland visitor demographics speaks to the greater possibility of challenging institutionalised and elite-led narratives within these landscapes relative to the house. Other examples such as Calke Abbey’s new Calke Explore development and accessible multi-use trails align with ecomuseology’s shift away from stagnant, building-centric repositories towards holistic environments which promote social welfare within their wider communities (Grenni *et al.* 2020, 411-412; Masterson *et al.* 2017; Davis 2008, 233). Though many estates, particularly in the National Trust, had been developing these sorts of landscape-based visitor strategies beforehand, the societal and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic solidified these initiatives and further increased public interest in these outdoor spaces with particular significance to their value for human wellbeing.

Heritage Parkland and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The global outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, and the COVID-19 pandemic that followed, led to periods of lockdown restrictions across the United Kingdom between March 2020 and July 2021 (Brown *et al.* 2021). Moreover, the pandemic and its lasting socio-economic effects are associated with a rise in physical and mental health issues in England and exacerbated existing trends in health inequalities (BMA 2024; Chen, Yang and Kuper 2024; Serrano-Alarcón *et al.* 2021). It has since been shown that green space access during the pandemic was crucial to the mental and physical wellbeing of local populations and helped motivate a drive to address existing inequalities of access to natural spaces (Maurer *et al.* 2023). Research by Sofaer *et al.* (2021) into the wellbeing effects of heritage sites demonstrated specifically how the pandemic strengthened public appreciation of the personal and psychological benefits of these historic spaces. As with other non-essential businesses, country houses were generally closed to the visiting public, but parklands and their wider estates were able to open intermittently during periods of lockdown (IFG 2022; Heath & Joyner 2020). In recognition of the diversion from traditional house museologies and the expanding and alternative uses of historic estate landscapes in the twenty-first century, discussions with research participants explored how the COVID-19 pandemic may have reshaped or reinforced both internal and external valuations of place. Dave Nassau of Burton Constable Hall highlighted how restricted access to these spaces during lockdown affected the visiting public and clarified the deeper significance of these natural environments for himself:

Nassau: 'I think that's one of our biggest selling points is the open spaces of the grounds and parkland here. You know, it's such a beautiful setting...I would say, I never realized how much it actually meant to people until the first lockdown, do you remember that one Susan? And it was that...first day we opened and Susan said "oh, there's a lady looking for you", "really?"...because during lockdown we were putting like little fifteen, twenty-second clips out of wildlife, you know, "this is what you'll see when you get back." And the lady came up and saw me and she went, "when you was doing that it pulled me round", there was tears...then it was like, God, this place really does mean such a lot to people. And...that's really grown, it's took that long but that's really grown on me' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 290-291).

Susan Hopkinson agreed on how the pandemic raised awareness to the value of the estate's parkland, so much so as to prompt a change to their outdoor programming:

Hopkinson: '...the thing that changed for so many of us was the pandemic. And that really made us think about what a fantastic asset this was for health and wellbeing...and for people, there was a big change of mindset of how important the outdoors were to them in the pandemic and that's what really made us think about making much more of our outdoor spaces [and] interpreting them [and] we secured some grant funding to be able to put some interpretation around the grounds...' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 304).

Lee Hitchcock of Holkham estate also noted how the pandemic enhanced an internal appraisal of their outdoor spaces:

Hitchcock: '...certainly when we had the pandemic [it] meant that everybody came to these places, but particularly the beaches. So, I think at that point, we had to slightly manage things differently [and it] helped us recognise the value of outside space. Of course, everybody was talking about outside space, and we were expressing the safety.... We want to make sure people understand that being in the parkland and walking around the park is good for mental health. We know that it is...and so I think there's just a general sense of [that], which maybe the pandemic escalated this [interest in a] more traditional, family based, healthy [offering] because everyone knows [it's] good for you and also there's a definite screen issue that young people have' (Hitchcock 2023, 609, 618).

Other interview participants reported a similar relationship between estate visiting and lockdown periods during the pandemic. Like Hopkinson and Nassau (Burton Constable), Alexa

Buffey stressed how the importance of the outdoor spaces at Beningbrough Hall during the easing of lockdown restrictions encouraged internal reflection on the value of the wider estate as a visitor destination. Additionally, she remarked that she felt increased engagement with these spaces as local amenity green space during the pandemic might have resulted in more long-term visitor relationships:

Graham: '[Do you feel that these places] provide...what seems to be kind of an essential service as the outdoors?'

Buffey: 'Yeah, yeah, I'd say so. And I think this must have come up as well in conversations you've had, but I think the pandemic was a big part in that...when we were able to reopen our outdoor spaces...we had so many people...say how grateful they were to have somewhere to go and feel safe and feel like they could be outdoors.... I do think that was really demonstrated...what we could offer to people and what that could mean to people...'

Graham: '...I was going to ask about that as well...if you felt that COVID had been a catalyst because...that has been a consistent theme through [a lot] of the places that I've spoken with. And...it encouraged a lot of people to better appreciate some of the spaces that are close to them... Maybe they are places they wouldn't have gone initially, but that was what was close, that was what was available and then when they got there, they found that it was really nice...if that seems to be consistent with your experience?'

Buffey: 'I would agree with that, yeah, completely' (Buffey 2023, 274-275).

This sentiment regarding place significance as a result of locality referenced by the author was raised during conversations with interview participants at Calke Abbey:

Graham: 'I've heard some other people...noticed a difference...with the COVID pandemic and lockdowns that they have found in some of the visitors [a] greater interest and appreciation for...local outdoor spaces...'

Lewney: 'I've had that from visitors where they've spoken to me and said "we live five miles away, we never visit because you don't visit the place on your doorstep. Through lockdown, we had to visit because we couldn't travel any further. And now we know you're here, we know you've got these facilities, we've come back once a week, or once a month, because we know we can walk the dog..."'

Taylor: ‘Also we have a really strong road network here...people come a lot further I think for Calke and that was also the case during lockdown’ (Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 393-394).

Pre-COVID shifts in estate tourism strategies towards the landscape were reinforced and enhanced by the unique circumstances of the pandemic and the effects of lockdowns. Thus, if stakeholders and decision makers across these estates or their overarching management bodies had previously been integrating wellbeing-focused outdoor programming and promotion, it was strengthened and clarified by the importance of green space access during COVID-19 lockdowns. In recognition of the disparity in health among disadvantaged groups (Pearce *et al.* 2010, 523), the significance of these landscapes in their value as restorative spaces for the public is enhanced by the efforts of these estates in improving access and inclusion which aligns with the value paradigms of contemporary approaches to landscape and heritage reviewed earlier in this work (Hodsdon 2021, 271-272; Davis 2008, 340). Yet this idea of their capacity for mental and physical restoration is not new. Reflecting on the idyllic nature of these rural estates in his contemporary eighteenth century, Timothy Nourse wrote that,

‘The True design then of such Places of Pleasure and Retreat is to sweeten the Fatigues both of the Body and of the Mind, and to recover us to our former Bent of Duty, which is but in some measure to restore Man to his lost Station’ (Nourse 1700, 339).

These landscapes continue to serve as sanctuaries of wellbeing, expressed in the mission objectives of Haddon Hall and Mapperton. However, the significance of this contemporary focus on these estate landscapes lies in how they have returned to such ‘Places of Pleasure and Retreat’, but for a wider, more diverse public. Illustrated throughout this chapter, both National Trust-owned and independent properties have endeavoured to improve outreach with ‘non-traditional’ country house visiting demographics and encourage a broader audience to engage with their properties. Though the interpretation and presentation of the house as a heritage artefact has evolved, interviewees consistently identified the greater potential for its wider estate landscapes to accomplish this aim, thereby addressing key twenty-first century social challenges and combating an increasingly outdated perspective of these spaces as elitist and exclusionary. Furthermore, research participants cited the limited appeal of the traditional country house tour which mirrors North American assessments of the conventional house museum model as lacking contemporary relevance (Ryan & Vagnone 2014, 38-39), with the surrounding landscapes of the country house serving to maintain high levels of visitor engagement in its place. This research has shown that this overarching ‘land, outdoors, and

nature' strategy is driving not just National Trust policy and tourism models, but that of many independent houses as well, providing evidence of a broader reconceptualisation of the landscapes beyond the house itself.

Site	Landscape use	Accessibility and inclusivity	Wellbeing benefits	COVID-19 as a catalyst
<i>Calke Abbey (NT)</i>	Physical activity, outdoor play	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Beningbrough (NT)</i>	Physical activity, outdoor play	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Osterley Park (NT)</i>	Community recreation, community gardening	Yes	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
<i>Holkham (Ind)</i>	Physical activity, outdoor play	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Burton Constable (Ind)</i>	Physical activity, outdoor play, community gardening	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Harewood (Ind)</i>	Outdoor play	Yes	Yes	Not mentioned
<i>Mapperton (Ind)</i>	Community gardening	Not mentioned	Yes	Not mentioned

Table 6. Review of the case study sites referenced in Chapter 6.2. Forms of landscape use discussed by interviewees is presented along with any references to access, inclusion, and wellbeing benefits provided by estate landscapes in visiting contexts. Instances of the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst are also noted.

These estates have diverged from their latter twentieth-century paradigm with environmentally sensitive parkland management strategies, regenerative agriculture, habitat creation, rewilding, and health-promoting green spaces for an increasingly diverse public. Even in instances where economic considerations are the critical factor in driving these changes (Table 6), the point remains that these historic estates are adapting to meet changes in the cultural and political fabric that they are embedded in. Moreover, it situates them within a contemporary critical framework which advocates for refashioning heritage and cultural landscapes away from 'static backdrops of human activity' (Ingold 1993, 152) in order to actively create more sustainable futures (Harrison *et al.* 2020b, 5-6; Davis 2008, 223; Butler 2006, 463). Through the integration of social and ecological concerns into extant cultural landscapes it similarly serves to synthesise the 'natural' and 'cultural' – a contestation of binary forms of conservation institutionalised through the authorised heritage discourse (Harrison 2015, 24). Therefore, acknowledging how popular and academic perspectives on these sites have placed them within a traditional and culturally conservative framework, these progressive developments, which can be read clearly in the landscape, call for a reassessment of these estates as public-facing heritage institutions in contemporary England.

Chapter 7. The Country House: A Reassessment?

The survival of England's country houses and their landed estates has been realised through the ability of owners to adapt to changing demands and circumstances over the centuries.

(Clemenson 1982 [2021], 215; Girouard 1978, 10). Over the course of their history, these estates were expressions of power through the ownership of land and the cultural signifiers displayed by the buildings and landscape architecture which made up the estate core. Yet, even if the clothing in which these powerhouses were dressed evolved over the centuries, their role within the British political and economic landscape was enshrined, bound up in the power gained from private land ownership through governmental office and political influence, commerce, rental incomes and other landed sources (Finch 2019, 61-62; Finch & Dyrmann 2019, 26; Girouard 1978, 2). In addition to the income generated through agricultural tenancies and its outputs, the political leveraging and parliamentary representation of the landed class strengthened the bond between land and power from the Restoration and beyond the Glorious Revolution (Worsley 2005, 427; Girouard 1978, 2-12). However, the later nineteenth century witnessed the zenith of the political and economic primacy of these rural estates, followed by their subsequent decline, driven, not least, by the agricultural depression which echoed from the 1870s to the end of the Second World War. Consequently, the significance of landownership underwent another evolution. 'If Edwardian country-house builders wanted land, it was not because they thought it would finance their running costs...it conferred status' (Aslet 2021, 4). Hence, even if this period



Figure 100. The famous Scarborough Clump of Holkham's renowned shoot, the 2nd Earl of Leicester in the foreground, 1899 (Ruffer 1977, 58)

can be understood as the twilight years of the traditional rural estate, the exclusive power of private land ownership remained, if perhaps not by way of the economic security gained from its investment, but rather the social capital acquired through the pleasures (Figure 100) of contemporary elite society which its ownership facilitated (Aslet 2021, 4; Tinniswood 2016, 222; Girouard 1978, 298-314).

Over the course of the twentieth century, the nation's country houses and their surrounding estates underwent perhaps the most striking shift in their socio-cultural, political, and economic histories. Outlined earlier, the post-war decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rebirth of these historic estates as public-facing heritage assets, a process which has directly informed their contemporary academic and popular meanings. Aided by systems of state intervention, the booming heritage industry of latter twentieth-century Britain and the 'cult of the country house' in popular media, country houses across the spectrum of ownership types became firmly embedded in the national identity and cultural heritage fabric – a case of adaptation to meet the demands of a changing world (Adams 2013; Cowell 2008, 109-126; Mandler 1997; Cannadine 1990, 637-696). Furthermore, within this transformation, the National Trust has played a leading role. Indeed, Robert Hewison argued that the survival of the country house owes a substantial debt to the Trust's twentieth-century philosophical turn away from its founding environmental mission towards the preservation of England's stately homes (Hewison 1987, 54). It is precisely this industry-turn towards heritage tourism from which Smith (2006, 115-161) argued that the country house exemplifies the authorised heritage discourse in England, along with the culturally ingrained practice of the country house visit as a nostalgic and politically conservative, middle-class performance. Hence, despite their evolutionary developments, their meanings have changed little since their construction, embodying social deference, high culture, and elite privilege (Smith 2006, 158-161). In essence, the power and status they exerted in previous centuries has been maintained in heritage contexts through the historical narratives and social hierarchies that they signify, embody, and project. Thus, they have served as a banner of traditional narratives of English cultural heritage in a readily changing and socially-conscious present.

In considering the fate of the historic estates which have successfully avoided liquidation, Clemenson argued that within the next generation, estate survival would likely reflect the 'priorities and values of late-twentieth century society' (1982 [2021], 225), a point which would hold equally true through the twenty-first. The integration of exhibitions or interpretive information on the labouring classes or enslaved individuals which historically underpinned these institutions are indicative of such in museological contexts (Smith 2016, 37; Young 2016,

209). However, the preceding chapters have proven that in more recent years, substantial changes are in fact taking place across the whole estate with a specific focus on ‘land, outdoors, and nature’ (Buffey 2023, 273). Environmental concerns are being integrated into estate management plans and tourism offerings are increasingly moving outside and away from the traditional house museum model. Therefore, while museologies within the walls of the house have evolved, a critical analysis of these estates from a broader landscape perspective is now essential as it provides opportunities to enhance and clarify our understanding of these landscapes which, like the houses, are and have historically, evolved to meet new challenges. The means by which the landscapes beyond the house are now being employed to address contemporary environmental and social challenges invites a review of the depth at which these sites exemplify notions of the AHD. Furthermore, in light of the recognition that these estates have historically undergone periods of transition, this research argues that these estates currently find themselves at yet another crossroads – one which is reflected, not in the house and its collections, but primarily in the landscape, where the majority of visitors actually engage with these sites.

7.1 Sustainable Landscapes

This thesis has examined the motivations and methods by which the parkland and farming landscapes of the English estate have recently been adapted to address environmental challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. While the practical applications of these ecologically-driven developments differ between landscape types, it was shown in Chapter 4 that they are linked through a shared revision of the priorities which these estate landscapes should serve. Moreover, these changes to historic parkland and farmland management systems are actively transforming not just the estate, but the wider rural landscape in a real and tangible way. More importantly, this visual and ideological departure from previous twentieth-century *modus operandi* bears significance to these estates in contemporary heritage contexts by challenging the cultural values entrenched within the country house museum.

Sustainable Parklands

Williamson (2012, 49) noted that modern appraisals of the landscape park have regarded them primarily as an ‘aesthetic artefact’, a point which is corroborated by the considerable amount of literature on the subject from the art historical discipline relative to more recent interdisciplinary perspectives (see Chapter 2.3). Though Williamson’s observation was in reference to their overlooked historical role as productive pastoral landscapes, their importance to biodiversity and landscape ecology as wood-pasture habitats has arguably been

even more neglected. While Oliver Rackham (1976) touched on the habitat value of historic parkland's ancient trees as early as the 1970s, lowland wood-pasture and parkland was identified as a priority habitat by the UK Biodiversity Framework in 1995 (JNCC 1995) and English Nature (now Natural England) published their first veteran tree and dead wood guidance handbook in 2000 which cited veteran trees in designed landscapes as 'much a part of [the] historic fabric as...the main house' (Read 2000, 66). Furthermore, as this research has demonstrated, the broader implementation of these biodiversity-focused, wood-pasture management practices in parkland settings is even more recent. The foregoing chapters have shed light on how these landscapes are currently undergoing a transition towards less manicured, 'untidy' standards of presentation driven by renegotiated perspectives on landscape significance.

Interpreting Untidiness

Jon Lewney's 'rally against tidiness' at Calke Abbey encapsulated this new management framework that now drives parkland maintenance across a broad range of estates. While Calke Abbey served as an early trial exercise in managing parkland for biodiversity through a rejection of a manicured aesthetic, interviewee commentary has shown that not only is this approach now standard practice across the National Trust, but it is being implemented at an increasing number of independently-owned estates, from Burton Constable to Hatfield estate. More importantly however, this research has shown that the shift has been the product of a philosophical transformation within estate management coupled with renegotiated expectations on the visual experience of estate parkland among the visiting public, which has in part come from a wider environmental awareness.

During the post-war decades in which the country house was stitched into the heart of the nation's cultural heritage fabric, perspectives on parkland emphasised a tidy, manicured, and sharp standard of presentation which Andy Eddy (Osterley Park) noted was reflective of an overarching philosophy of patriarchal control which has historically underpinned ideologies of the landed estate (Eddy 2023, 799-800). This sense of order and control can be equally interpreted within the standardised presentation of the country house as a heritage artefact. Indeed, Smith (2006, 117-118) cited the rural landscapes and parks in which they sit as inherent parts of the country house motif which symbolises order and social deference. However, the research presented here has shown that since that assessment, the visual experience and landscape aesthetics of country house parkland have been transformed. It was originally the rough and unmanicured parkland of Calke Abbey, reflecting the disorderliness of the 'un-stately stately home' at its core, which drew the attention of the National Trust in the 1980s and set the

estate apart from its peers. However, while the house at Calke continues to be an anomaly among country houses with its peeling interiors, clutter, and preserved decay, Calke Park is now characteristic of a new, environmentally-focused parkland model which expresses new twenty-first century visions of ‘the natural’ through disorder and untidiness, juxtaposed against the traditional curation of the country house that persists today.

Beyond the internal shift towards ‘untidy’ or naturalised parklands through increased levels of dead wood and rougher, more diverse grasslands which speak to biodiversity rather than latter twentieth-century ordered gentility, a corresponding turn among visitors in how these landscapes are perceived reveals an evolution in the value of these historic landscapes. While research from Defra on the public sentiment of dead wood found greater negative perceptions in formal (Stowe Gardens, Buckinghamshire) landscapes compared to informal (Knepp estate, West Sussex), their findings showed that the majority of visitors in both cases felt either neutral or positive about the presence of dead wood, citing that visitors were ‘generally knowledgeable about the benefits of leaving such trees in the landscape’ (Brockett, Clements, and van der Wielen 2025, 3). This public concern for the environment, including in estate landscapes, was highlighted by interviewees as an important macro-cultural shift in transitioning these historic estates into new forms of ecologically-driven parkland management schemes and interpretation. Thus, rather than echoing the country house’s appeal to a cultural past, through their visual transformation in the pursuit of improved biodiversity, these parkland landscapes reflect a progressive cultural present and a public concern for environmental futures.

Sustainable Farming and Arable Reversion

Many of England’s protected landscapes, including the National Parks and National Landscapes, are farmed, pastoral ‘cultural landscapes’ (Tuncliffe 2006), historically belonging to upland estates, much of which remain in private ownership (Stratigos *et al.* 2022, 206-207; Shrubsole 2019, 249). Yet the predominately arable or mixed farming landscapes that surround the house and parkland of the lowland estate have been largely untethered to any similar cultural conservation planning. Additionally, as they fall outside the core areas of house and park which characterise the typical tourist experience, they are less bound by the aesthetic expectations and cultural performances which have been part of the traditional country house visit. Nevertheless, they are an intrinsic part of the landed estate and were perceived as such by those who built them (Finch 2019, 80; Williamson 1998, 9, 18). The opportunities derived from owning a country residence endorsed by John Claudius Loudon are both the ‘pleasures of agriculture and gardening’ (Loudon 1806, 4). Therefore, linking the contemporary country house and parkland to their wider agricultural environment frames the modern estate as the

interconnected patchwork landscape as they have been understood by their owners throughout their history. Moreover, tenanted and in-hand farms often comprise a substantial portion of the total estate footprint and land value. Holkham's sweeping 3,000-acre parkland is dwarfed by the estate's near 10,000 acres of surrounding farmland. According to a 2024 report, of contemporary landed estates, 72% of their total land value is agricultural (Carter Jonas 2026). Consequently, far from being of secondary consideration, changes taking place within farming contexts are significant to the overall estate, the effect they have on the landscape as a whole, and the role they play in contemporary society.

This thesis has demonstrated that while not subject to heritage preservation, there has recently been a reprioritisation of purpose in these estate landscapes that marks a significant philosophical watershed which correlates to changes in the park. This turning point is characterised by a deviation from centuries of a singular focus of productivity to regenerative farming strategies which balance agricultural output with natural capital and enhanced biodiversity. Moreover, this work has shown the degree to which these farming landscapes are tied to economic considerations, risk mitigation, and government-funded agri-environmental schemes. As such, in response to either the real or perceived instability of funding for regenerative farming under the Sustainable Farming Incentive, and the financial and cultural success of *Knepp Wildland*, landowners may be more likely to enter into such landscape recovery schemes which can be further financially supported through the low-risk, 'Knepp model' of rewilding undertaken at Mapperton and popularised among England's independent estates more broadly. Furthermore, in contrast to the naturalisation of the designed landscape from the formal Baroque gardens to the Picturesque over the long eighteenth-century, the transformation of these ordered, arable farmlands to 'wilder' landscapes, marks a dramatic aesthetic shift.

Reconceptualising Improvement

Since the early-modern period, estate farming systems have been a continual exercise in agricultural maximisation. From the ideologies of improvement which infused Enlightenment-era agrarian advancements with a moralistic and paternalistic sense of duty (Finch 2019, 80; Martins 2004, 1; Wilmot 1990, 4), to twentieth-century agrochemical industrialisation (Brassley *et al.* 2021, 2; Shorrocks 2017, 31-41), these landscapes have historically been defined by the pursuit of agricultural productivity. Thus, the integration of nature-based regenerative farming methods into these landscapes represents a significant reprioritisation of land and marks a particularly striking shift away from the ecologically destructive farming methods of the latter twentieth century.

In an ironic about-face, the regenerative farming strategies being implemented in estate farming supported by the government's Sustainable Farming Incentive, are primarily historic, pre-industrial agrarian improvements. Agricultural reformers such as the 1st Earl of Leicester of Holkham, expressed power over the landscape through the manipulation of the natural environment to achieve agricultural efficiency and productive intensification. Yet these improvements, including crop rotations, fodder crops, and convertible husbandry have been reinterpreted as environmentally-sensitive methods to address issues of climate change and biodiversity loss. Therefore, historic ideas of 'improvement' central to the historic landed class, are returning to the English estate in a reconceptualised and twenty-first century framework. Indeed, Holkham's current Head of Conservation, Jake Fiennes, observed this as such: 'regenerative agriculture is not a new form of agriculture, it is about learning from the past and implementing for the future' (British Ecological Society 2025, 4).

Hitherto disconnected from the house and parkland as a heritage artefact and tourist experience, regenerative farming strategies provide an opportunity to rejoin these landscapes through their integration into the visitor experience. As an industry leader in regenerative farming and a prominent visitor destination, Holkham's exhibition of sustainable farming systems and climate change in their visitor centre is a model for how these historic forms of estate-based agriculture, reapplied to address modern environmental challenges, can be integrated into the visitor experience. Wimpole Hall's heritage breed farm is similarly an educational tool rather than a petting zoo experience, a model which Harewood plans to incorporate in place of their exotic bird exhibit during their landscape redevelopment strategy (Knight 2023, 563).

Traditionally focused on the house and collections, Hatfield is redesigning their visitor guidebook to emphasise their environmental and regenerative strategies alongside a more conventional art historical focus on the house (Mitchell 2023, 582). These sorts of approaches which incorporate historic and contemporary agri-environmental education into the visitor-facing portion of these estates serve to connect the house with its agricultural landscape in a modern heritage context.

Leading from David Hassall's (Wimpole) statement that large estates such as Holkham can serve as a model for the adoption of sustainable landscape initiatives (Hassall 2024, 847-848), this research provides a valuable opportunity to disseminate effective approaches to both estate landscape management and the visitor experience. Through analysing the means by which estates of varying sizes, configurations, and ownership contexts have navigated the

economic and practical considerations of environmentally-driven land management, it provides practical examples for other estates to follow suit. The cost-benefit analyses made between agri-environmental policy, commercial needs, and the opportunities for the use of private capital to deliver ecological objectives featured in this work stand as an accessible introduction to other estate owners to engage with contemporary, sustainable systems of land management. Furthermore, following the decline of the traditional house museum experience which this research has established, its investigation into how some participant estates have integrated these concerns into a remodelled and future-orientated museological visitor experience serves as further evidence for sites beyond this research to modernise their exhibitory visitor model in line with contemporary environmental issues. Further research which enquires more deeply into the fundamentals and logistics of signing onto agri-environmental policy (especially in light of changing legislation), balancing financial income and expenditure, and tracking visitor engagement with these new forms of estate-based museology would enhance this work's potential as a reference guide for other estates. However, as it stands, its investigation into the practical implementations of new systems of land management and integrated visitor experience models give weight to its impact outside a purely academic sphere.

Landscape Futures and Rewilding

Chapter 6 revealed the integral link between government funding, regenerative farming strategies and comprehensive arable reversion schemes on large landed estates. Moreover, it highlighted the broader financial and risk-mitigation factors considered in pursuing such work. With the future of parliamentary-supported regenerative farming in a state of uncertainty, the extant Landscape Recovery and Countryside Stewardship schemes remain a viable option for landed estates and their tenant farmers. As one interviewee noted, the 'Knepp model' of rewilding in which an estate can maximise income through government payouts for habitat creation and rare breed supplements, compounded by a fashionable ecotourism business model, is an enticing option particularly in light of the Sustainable Farming Incentive's cancellation. Moreover, there is a discernible trend for rewilding among England's landed estates, inspired by the popular and commercial success of Knepp. As pointed out above, 'everyone wants a beaver and a bison' (Mitchell 2023, 591). Furthermore, this trend is enhanced by the idea identified by an interviewee that environmental recovery work among private landed estates is effectively an 'ongoing licence to operate' (Anonymous) in light of issues around wealth disparity and the potential for property right reform in future governments.

It is a relevant acknowledgement that if UK government funding streams do indeed begin to shift towards larger habitat creation and landscape recovery schemes, that as larger, longer-term

agreements, there is an inherent preferential bias towards larger landowners over small as a result of scale and greater long-term economic stability among larger estates. Furthermore, throughout this research, risk aversion and cost effectiveness has emerged as a dominant concern in the management or reversion of arable landscapes, hence the preference in some instances for the use of private capital, over which the landowner or manager has more control. As such, there is the possibility that the estates more likely to undertake larger, long-term recovery schemes will be those of greater scale and commercial diversification, and thus financially robust enough to weather economic storms, inject private capital, and assume greater risk (Lewney 2025, 526; Hassall 2024, 847-848). There are echoes, therefore, of the widespread adoption of agrarian improvements during the late early-modern period led by large landowners who, aided by systems of enclosure, integrated new agricultural technologies into their extensive, privately-owned farmlands (Martins 2004, 149-150; Overton 1996, 4, 159-167; Thirsk 1987, 58-60; Clemenson 1982 [2021], 75). Consequently, there may indeed be opportunities to read class and privilege through the rewilded landscapes of the contemporary estate. In c.1750, Thomas Gainsborough painted *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, depicting the couple on their improved estate, the enclosed, mixed farming landscape and use of modern agricultural technology such as the seed drill plainly visible. If he were to conduct the same exercise today, the couple might be depicted in front of a wilder 'Knepp-style' landscape with Exmoor ponies visible in the distance. However, even if there is a relationship between the rewilding movement and landed wealth in England, the gains in biodiversity from these estate rewilding schemes are legitimate and contribute to a wider national strategy of ecological rehabilitation. Furthermore, the visual experience of these rougher landscapes speak to a landscape character which diverges from the order and control traditionally expressed between the house, manicured parkland, and the neatly managed fields of the conventional arable farm. Thus, if their associated 'untidy' parklands are any indicator, then these 'wilder' estate landscapes will exist within a similarly 'neutral' space relative to the country house which unmistakably and emphatically expresses power and privilege through its architecture, furnishings, and collections of fine art.

Despite this idea of landscape 'neutrality' relative to the country house which this research has demonstrated may exist in rewilded landscapes similar to parkland, this thesis also acknowledges the popularity of the rewilding movement among the landed elite and the socio-cultural implications of large-scale landscape manipulation in this context. Referenced above, interviewees noted the aesthetic and cultural appeal of rewilding amongst owners of landed estates (Kingston 2025, 762; Mitchell 2023, 591). Consequently, beyond contestations of the

ecological significance of rewilded estate landscapes in England as being ‘little more than a Capability Brown parkland’ (Leadbeater *et al.* 2022, 370), this thesis has begun to investigate into the social and cultural implications of estate rewilding efforts and problematises the sense of altruism which one interviewee (see page 199) noted is often conveyed publicly by these estates undertaking rewilding work such as Knepp. Historically a site defined by class dynamics, social deference and expressions of power, the following section discusses how the aforementioned changes in visiting contexts have begun to democratise these elite landscapes.

7.2 Democratising Arcadia

The country house is an architectural space historically defined by social deference, embodying ‘the relations *between* different groups’ (West 1999, 104). This cultural and social exclusivity, characterised by class differentiation, extended out into the designed landscapes of the park. The parklands, encircled by boundary walls and woodland perimeter belts, served to socially segregate, seclude, and deliver privacy to their owners from the mid-eighteenth century (Williamson 1998, 101-102). More recently, Laurajane Smith (2006, 129) observed the passage of visitors through this boundary as a key symbol of social deference within the modern country house visit. This sense of ‘allowance’ that she identifies, might be further strengthened by payment of an entry fee which at many sites has been collected upon entry to the parkland. However, new priorities in estate management which have focused on the landscapes and the ‘outdoors’ are actively addressing this historic exclusivity through more inclusive and equitable programming. Moreover, despite historical designs of social segregation and deference, these elite landscapes accommodate more diverse populations in a way that the country house as a heritage object, is so far unable to.

Divergent Spaces: House, Park, and Dismantling the Park Wall

In both historic and modern contexts, the boundary wall of the country house park has been a physical and metaphorical barrier. However, to improve engagement with groups outside the traditional, older, middle-class demographics in contemporary country house visiting contexts, steps have been taken to increase site accessibility through revised payment schemes and improved outreach. As reported by interviewees, the shifting of the pay barrier at Holkham from the park boundary gatehouse to the hall and the walled garden, ‘changed the visitor profile...overnight’ (Penlington 2023, 632). As part of their landscape redevelopment strategy, Harewood House plans to similarly restructure their payment system to make parkland access free of charge to better engage with disadvantaged communities in nearby Leeds (Knight 2023, 569-570).

It was noted in Chapter 6 that it can be difficult in some instances to accurately track the number of visitors to an estate property as porous entries provide easy access to estate parkland, even if parkland access is dependent on payment. Osterley Park is unique among the sample estates as it is accessible at all hours and days of the year as an urban amenity green space, but all four other participant National Trust properties cited unofficial, unpaid entry points which are used by the public, often through rights of way. While in many cases, access through these cannot be obstructed by legal right, interviewees (Hassall 2024, 829; Buffey 2023, 279; Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 394) remarked on a personal sense that these entry points, used primarily by the local community, contribute to the organisation's charitable mission of providing important green spaces for the public. In instances where deprived communities might benefit from green space access, but face transport issues, some estates have discussed possible strategies to redress this including sponsorship for coach travel or intra-estate shuttle services to nearby public transit stops (Buffey 2023, 281; Hitchcock 2023, 611; Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 329; Knight 2023, 574). Thus, these boundary walls, which have stood for centuries as a means of social segregation, are being figuratively dismantled through direct and indirect action.

Underpinning the growing emphasis on improving public access to parkland is the fact that these landscapes can support a much broader demographic of visitors in contrast to the house. Academic enquiries into the country house visit have defined it as a socially exclusive, largely white, middle-class performance that appeals to a culturally conservative sense of national nostalgia (Fowler 2025; Fowler & Poynting 2024; Donington 2023a, 143; Smith 2021; Fowler 2020; Smith 2016; Adams 2013, 11; Bressley 2013; Watson 2013; Smith 2006, 115-161; Hewison 1987, 63-71). To address this, country house museums have opened up areas of domestic service, and pursued more diverse, critically engaged social exhibitions. Nevertheless, the primary demographic within the house visit remains largely limited to the traditional visitor profile described above. However, this research has revealed a greater sense of cultural neutrality within parkland landscapes that can accommodate a much greater diversity of individuals. Osterley Park makes the case in point: Andy Eddy noted an ethnic and cultural contrast between white, middle-class house visitors and site staff and the users of the parkland who are predominately people of colour from the surrounding South Asian communities (Eddy 2023, 807-808). In addition, the colonial histories of these estates are projected more clearly through the architecture and collections of the house, which can trigger emotions among certain minority groups. This was observed in relation to a similar ethnic divide

amongst house and parkland visitors at Harewood House, where this discomfort felt in relation to the history of the house does not carry over to the parkland (Knight 2023, 572).

Not only can estate landscapes comfortably accommodate a more ethnically diverse visitor demographic, but also a broader range of age groups and individuals with special needs or disabilities. This research has demonstrated that the inherent safety and accessibility of the gentle topography of naturalistic parkland, complemented by user facilities and the integration of disability-friendly visitor elements such as multi-use trails is central to this wider appeal (Buffey 2023, 272-273; Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 319, 337-338; Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 385, 388). As a self-contained unit surrounded by a boundary wall, there is a clear sense of safety as an enclosed and managed landscape. While the idea of safety in the country house visit was previously identified (Smith 2006, 139-142), it was interpreted as explicitly social, produced through the cultural homogeneity of the majority visiting population. Hence, through this turn towards 'land, outdoors, and nature' in recent, inclusivity-focused, landscape-based tourism models, it is primarily non-discriminatory accessibility, rather than socio-cultural or political cohesion, which provides a valuable sense of safety.

The capacity for inclusivity, diversity, and physical and economic accessibility within estate parkland contributes to a wider societal need for improved mental and physical wellbeing. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic acted to magnify the issue, reinforcing understood links between green space, heritage engagement, and human health (Maurer *et al.* 2023). Moreover, the pandemic, and the social distancing measures brought in by the government, strengthened the significance of estate parkland in country house visiting and accelerated pre-existing trends towards the outdoors in estate tourism models. In light of contemporary challenges around increasing rates of poor mental health, these landscapes are being effectively employed to address some of the key social issues of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, as with the philosophical shifts which have underpinned the prioritisation of the natural environment in estate parkland and farmland, these 'polite landscapes' are undergoing a reconceptualisation in response to changes in their socio-political contexts. Designed as private refuges for the elite, they are being democratised as landscapes for the promotion of public wellbeing through outdoor recreation. Lady Spencer's Wood at Hardwick Hall, once a favourite walking trail of the 5th Duchess of Devonshire in the late eighteenth century, is now a space for individuals of all backgrounds to do the same. At Holkham, the lake which was once the space for genteel leisure and sport, is now the perfect place for the public to enjoy a sunny afternoon (Figure 101). By pivoting towards this inclusive and accessible landscape-focused model, these destinations

have maintained significant, and often increasing, levels of visitor engagement against the declining relevance of the traditional house tour.



Figure 101. A couple sits by Holkham Lake (author's photo)

In addition to augmenting the house-focused narrative of the critical heritage assessments referenced throughout this work (Donington 2023a, 143; Smith 2021; Fowler 2020; Smith 2016; Bressley 2013; Smith 2006, 115-161), the evidence from this research carries significant potential to impact the estate tourism industry as a whole. By establishing how estates have successfully pivoted to a 'land, outdoors and nature' visitor model and thus diversified visitor demographics, this thesis might serve as a map for other estates which have continued to rely on a 'traditional' house museum experience. Again, this carries particular significance for independent estates beyond the remit of the National Trust which have turned towards outdoors investment at the overarching organisational level. Evidence from discussions with directors and experience managers at sites such as Holkham or Harewood, might serve as a blueprint for the successful redevelopment of tourism strategies at other estates. If so, the expansion of this landscape approach in visiting contexts has the potential to further contribute to addressing contemporary issues of social welfare and human wellbeing which centre around the benefits of green space. Consequently, the impact of the evidence and analysis given in this thesis holds the potential for real tangible benefits outside the scope of a purely academic setting.

7.3 Present Tensions and Future Research

Before undertaking a reinterpretation of the contemporary English landed estate following the evidence and analysis given above, it is beneficial to reflect on the limitations of this research, imbalances within the developments discussed in this thesis, and how these demand future enquiries to further enhance our understanding of these complex political, cultural, economic, and environmental spaces. While the evidence from the case studies demonstrates a broad and sometimes concerted effort to realign estate landscapes with environmental sustainability and public wellbeing, it also reveals uneven rates of change and occasional tensions between both rhetoric and delivery and amongst a diversity of stakeholders. Firstly, certain external catalysts have encouraged a rapid change in recent years. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic aided in transforming parklands into vital infrastructure for public health and localised wellbeing as part of a growing interest outdoor recreation, while changing post-Brexit agricultural subsidies have accelerated institutional decision-making regarding arable reversion, habitat creation, and parkland management. However, ecological restoration in particular operates on a multi-decadal timeline. Redressing decades of post-war agricultural productivism or allowing for woodland growth and dead wood decay to occur requires a generational patience that rarely aligns with human timescales and policy frameworks. The cancellation of the Sustainable Farming Incentive discussed in Chapter 2.1 (see page 228) an example of how transience in government policy can conflict with the long-term needs of environmental work.

Furthermore, an occasional friction exists between what these case study sites articulate in their public-facing materials and what they deliver on the ground. Both large-scale heritage institutions like the National Trust and independent estates have highlighted environmental stewardship, rewilding, inclusivity, and wellbeing in their public-facing materials. However, their execution can be complicated by entrenched perspectives on landscape management and practical, structural limitations. For instance, while estates champion biodiversity and the ecological value of ‘untidiness’, zoning restrictions have sometimes confined these ‘wilder’ spaces to the wider parkland, in some cases leaving the immediate lawn environments flanking the house meticulously manicured to satisfy traditional aesthetic expectations and the needs of commercial venue hires. Tensions also arose in some cases between stakeholders at a particular site, such as Osterley Park’s tenant farmer’s disinterest in transitioning to sustainable farming systems which stands in opposition to the organisational directives of the National Trust. At Mapperton, Kingston cited her difference in opinion on regular hedgerow maintenance against that of the estate owners who prefer ‘billowing, messy, scruffy hedgerows’ (Kingston 2025, 769).

A similar tension exists within the socio-cultural values between the house and parkland. Although estates are expanding parkland access for diverse communities, the conserved country house frequently remains an exclusionary space of high-art connoisseurship framed by elite histories. At sites like Osterley Park and Harewood House, a diverse public utilises the wider parkland as valuable green space, while the interior of the house continues to attract a predominantly white, middle-class demographic. Consequently, the estate landscape might be argued as being a progressive marketing tool that shields the traditional, elitist core of the country house from deeper structural reform. These tensions suggest that while the ‘landscape turn’ offers a genuine mechanism for contesting the authorised heritage discourse, its execution is fragmented, caught between shifts towards addressing contemporary social issues and the retention of traditional, elite heritage paradigms – a complexity which will be unpacked later in this thesis.

These tensions between stakeholders and the temporal issues identified across these case studies reveal critical opportunities for future research. Because the majority of these ecological and socio-cultural shifts documented in this study are in their relative infancy, there is a clear opportunity for further longitudinal study, particularly in light of the length of ecological timescales emphasised by research participants (Lewney 2024, 473; Penlington 2024, 725; Eddy 2023, 822). Furthermore, acknowledging the rapid pace of governmental change for which the cancellation of SFI is one such example, repeated research at either regular intervals or as part of a longer, multi-year assessment, may deliver a better understanding of how estates might negotiate agri-environmental policy changes and the use of private capital in the long term. It would equally facilitate an assessment of rates of change in both tourism and environmental land management contexts which may slow or quicken in relation to wider socio-cultural, economic, and political turns. This could provide insight into how those estates which have not yet undertaken such changes may find themselves encouraged to do so in the future. In addition, considering the cultural contrast this research has identified between the country house interior and the wider parkland and estate, it would measure the degree to which this spatial and cultural dichotomy has become entrenched, or if the country house as a heritage artefact might begin to develop alongside the more accessible and accommodating landscapes beyond its walls.

Finally, as outlined in Chapter 3.1, this thesis acknowledges the limitations created by issues of research scope. While this research has focused on the distinct legislative and cultural landscape of England and its lowland estates, international perspectives would provide a useful comparative model. Examining how other historic estates, either across the devolved nations of

the UK or in continental Europe, navigate the intersecting pressures of climate change, land-use subsidies, and public welfare, would provide a valuable critique of the English model.

Furthermore, as this research has relied on consultation with a small set of individuals in land, house, and estate management, there are opportunities for research which takes a broader ethnographic and sociological approach. Having determined that increasing numbers of visitors to these estates seek the outdoors, rather than the house, a methodology which seeks to determine social value amongst the visiting public through survey materials would provide a valuable resource to future estate management plans and stand as a significant methodological reappraisal of Laurajane Smith's original study presented in *Uses of Heritage* (2006). Lastly, engaging with a broader group of relevant stakeholders, e.g., more tenant farmers, local communities, or non-visitors, would further identify potential areas of contest or agreement in landscape use and significance.

While these prospective horizons shed light on potential avenues for future landscape and heritage scholarship, the empirical findings established within this study offer a timely and much needed justification for reinterpreting the contemporary estate. The following section brings together these intersecting themes of ecological resilience and democratisation along with the evidence provided above to re-evaluate the role, significance, and complex realities of the modern English estate as a heritage asset and living entity within the modern rural landscape.

7.4 Sustainable Arcadias

This thesis has shed light on tangible and intangible transformations within contemporary estate landscapes. Yet, in museological contexts, the country house to a large extent, remains unchanged. Despite the integration of more socio-critical interpretation in the late twentieth century, the country house continued to uphold the aesthetic, elite, and nationalising values appealed to during their transformation into culturally significant heritage objects (Smith 2006). The cultural contrast between the house and parkland visit revealed by this research indicates that this persists. Indeed, if a re-evaluation of the country house as a heritage artefact and visitor destination was pursued, but its perspective limited to the house and its collections, previous assessments might go largely unchallenged. Cowell (2024, 206-209) cites Harewood House as an exemplar of transparent and equitable modern curation on its historic involvement with slavery, but Harewood's Deputy CEO remarked that the house caters to a 'very traditional, historic house audience' nonetheless (Knight 2023, 572). However, the country house is merely one piece of a larger ensemble which includes the parkland and wider estate. Therefore, as a

result of the physical and ideological changes which this thesis has identified, when these estates are read in their entirety, earlier perspectives which were predominately informed by the house are problematised through a landscape perspective. These changes are indicative of the latest within a long history of adaptation among these estates. At this particular crossroads two competing discourses are playing out in popular debates: one which upholds their traditional values, emblematic of the authorised heritage discourse in England, and the other which prioritises contemporary challenges of ecological crises and human health and wellbeing.

The Country House and Twenty-first Century Heritage Debates

The authorised heritage discourse (AHD) is one which ‘privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building’ (Smith 2006, 11). The country house and its collections of furniture, artworks, and *objets d’art* have been regarded as emblematic of the AHD in England since their entry into the heritage lexicon during the late twentieth century. Chapter 2.3 illustrated how during this process, appeals to a particular narrative of the national identity and high culture gave rise to claims that they are the ‘quintessence of Englishness’ and the ‘country’s greatest contribution to Western civilization’ (Mandler 1997, 1). Central to this was their transition from private, aristocratic power base to public-facing tourism destination in which owners adapted to the political and economic circumstances of the new post-war society, opening their doors to the paying public as a means of survival. Born out of this was the clichéd ‘country house visit’, a cultural practice which came into its own during the Thatcherite years and now seen as reflective of the contemporary conservative nostalgia (Mandler 1997, 411; Hewison 1987, 63-71). Smith’s (2006, 161) assessment of the country house visit in the early twenty first century places it in this cultural milieu and argues that the ‘meanings of the country house itself have not substantially changed since they began to be built over 400 years ago’. Cited above, this conclusion has since been reinforced by more recent analyses (see page 256). However, England’s historic estates, and in particular those owned by the National Trust, have found themselves at the centre of a contemporary social and political debate. This debate reveals an emerging shift in the role and cultural heritage significance, and therefore meaning, of the country house and the landscapes to which they are inextricably linked.

‘De-authorising’ the National Trust and Landed Estate

In her article, *The National Trust has lost the language of architecture*, *The Spectator* journalist Laura Freeman (Freeman 2021) lamented the lack of on-site interpretive information at Stourhead on the architect Palladio or the Picturesque movement, lambasting the ‘wellbeing wibble’ and ‘awful wildflower doggerel’ that she found instead. Fellow *Spectator* journalist,

Harry Mount, made a similar critique in 2017 with his coining of the phrase, ‘National Trust Kiddy World’ (Mount 2017). In his article, he alleged that the National Trust had despoiled and dumbled down Osterley Park as the property pivoted towards a model of family-friendly outdoor leisure, featuring cycling facilities for children and families. Gone, he argues, is the ‘sublime aesthetic’ of the stately home and its historic parkland; in effect, the characteristics which define the country house as emblematic of the authorised heritage discourse in England. In the subtext of his polemic lies the implication that Osterley’s South Asian communities should engage with Osterley Park in a manner consistent with the high culture-focused heritage tour of yesterday. His critique is clear evidence that such criticisms extend out into the parkland as well as through the house and its collections. This research (Chapter 6.1), along with that referenced above on the public perception of dead wood (Brockett, Clements, and van der Wielen 2025), has shown that increased public sensitivity around environmental issues has led to a greater acceptance of new standards of ‘untidy’ parkland. Nevertheless, recent efforts by the Trust to improve biodiversity in the Charles Bridgeman designed landscape of Sherborne Estate in Gloucestershire has been met with some resistance. Detractors of the scheme, which has involved wetland restoration with the inclusion of dead wood assemblages and rougher, taller grass and sward, have argued the landscape was better when it was ‘properly maintained’ (Humphries 2025). Beyond the park boundary and outside the purview of heritage conservation, environmental schemes on Trust-owned estate farmland have similarly drawn ire, with arable reversion schemes labelled ‘a bloody mess’ by one of the former tenant farmers of the Trust’s Killerton Estate in Devon (Gatten 2025; du Toit 2025).

If the National Trust serves as a political and cultural target within the heritage debates of the early twenty-first century, it could equally be argued as a barometer for the direction of England’s landed estates more broadly. Thirty-seven years before *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975* (1974) was held at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the National Trust pivoted away from their founding environmental mission to rescue ailing estates and opened up the country house as a public tourist destination. During the late 1980s when Hewison (1987) reflected on the banality of the nostalgia-driven, *Brideshead*-inspired country house visit, the National Trust was already conducting the first experiment in biodiversity-focused parkland management, decades before contemporary ideas of the ‘eco-estate’. Thus, the National Trust and its over 100 landed estates might serve as an indicator of prevailing trends among landed estates as a whole. Consequently, this transition towards estate landscapes at the Trust as the primary visitor destination within an overarching landscape philosophy that advocates for human and environmental wellbeing can be interpreted as evidence of the industry’s changing

course; the independent sites presented here corroborate the argument that these developments and their ideological underpinnings are in fact taking place across a broader diversity of landed estates.

By drawing out its ideological underpinnings and wider socio-cultural and political contexts, this thesis has demonstrated that this move towards ‘land, outdoors, and nature’, goes beyond merely an emphasis on the surrounding landscapes of the country house in an extant cultural framework. It is a reformation of the philosophies which have underpinned managerial and interpretive directives across these estates since the country house was embedded in the nation’s heritage fabric and is a departure from the values which are central to the notion of an authorised heritage discourse. Furthermore, key to the AHD is the primacy of the expert, yet integral to this transformation has been a response to the communities which these places serve. Far from the curator-led focus on the house and collections which emphasise their intrinsic artistic and historical significance in an authorised heritage paradigm, the landscapes have been reconceptualised to meet the needs of both a diversifying public and the natural environment. There has been an increased demand from the public for safe, accessible, and healthy green spaces to which these estates have responded. The redirected focus at Osterley Park criticised by Mount (2017) would be limited to the artistic and historic significance of its parkland designs, rather than cycling lessons for local children, had this ‘land, outdoors, and nature’ strategy lacked a fundamental ideological transformation.

Heritage is not a *thing*, but rather a *process* in which cultural meanings are negotiated and created through behaviours and practices over time (Harvey 2001). Moreover, within a particular context, multiple, and potentially competing discourses, can be operating simultaneously (Smith 2006, 4-5, 83-84). Within the context of the AHD, overarching bodies such as UNESCO and ICOMOS act as ‘authorising institutions of heritage’ (Smith 2006, 113), which have represented a dominant, expert-led discourse to which the country house has traditionally belonged. However, in contesting these dominant discourses, critical approaches have emphasised the means by which communities assign cultural heritage significance through identity, memory, sense of place, and sensory experiences (Gentry & Smith 2019, 1149; Jones & Leech 2015, 15). In doing so, this process of ‘heritage from below’ serves to challenge hegemonic discourses and cultural meanings (Davis 2018, 1-2; Robertson 2012, 11). Thus, while the country house might continue to exhibit cultural values of the authorised heritage discourse in England, as the majority of visitors actually come for purposes of outdoor leisure in

the parkland and network of paths across their wider, increasingly biodiverse landscapes, it is within this landscape context that the meanings of these heritage sites are being remade. In light of this, this thesis reinterprets these estates and the changing roles of their landscapes to better reflect their significance in contemporary England.

Reinterpreting the English Estate

The critical heritage studies and postmodern museologies discussed in Chapter 2 have shifted away from a classical, objectivist paradigm which relies on intrinsic object significance, expert judgement, and nation-building – values which exemplify the traditional presentation of the country house and its collections. These new approaches seek to address global challenges and inequalities, promote multi-vocality, enact change, reach new audiences, and address issues of elitism, representation, and inaccessibility (Davis 2008, 340). The latest definition of a museum produced by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), articulates this through four critical components: accessibility, inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability (ICOM 2022). This research has demonstrated two key points related to this shift: firstly, that despite interpretive developments, the country house and its collections of fine art and furnishings has struggled to meet these objectives. Secondly, and most importantly, the wider landscapes of the estate have taken the lead in promoting these principles in place of the declining relevance of the ‘niche’ country house visit in contemporary tourism contexts which is reciprocally related to changing public attitudes and community needs.

The ideals of contemporary heritage and museum practice discussed above are encapsulated in the museological model of the ecomuseum. In light of the interpretive flexibility and a lack of defined parameters for ecomuseology, this thesis identified it as a ‘dynamic process or methodology through which heritage, nature, landscapes, community, and sustainability are linked with an overarching purpose of local societal improvement’ (see page 41). Such an approach is relevant at a time of increasing environmental and social challenges as ecomuseums have been highlighted for their potential to provide opportunities for ‘encouraging and improving more environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable living’ (Chang *et al.* 2015, 15, 23). By contributing to environmental and social sustainability through improving local biodiversity, combating climate change, and promoting accessible and inclusive green spaces structured around community engagement, the values estate landscapes increasingly embody can be mapped onto those of the ecomuseum as reflective of contemporary heritage and museological principles.

This thesis does not argue that the English landed estate *is* an ecomuseum – in practical terms, these estates are too broad and diverse to assign them any singular definition. While their histories, heritage tourism value, and contemporary eco-landscape strategies link these sites together, this research has demonstrated how their operational diversity, particularly among independent estates, challenges such sweeping definitions. Furthermore, while a substantial number of ecomuseums are in fact under mixed or private management (Davis 2018, 2), the depth of commercial interest at some independent estates could be seen in conflict with the use of the term ‘museum’. However, this thesis maintains that the intersectionality and environment-level perspective of the ecomuseum model provides a useful conceptual framework to read landed estates undertaking such work in contemporary heritage and museological contexts. For instance, as ecomuseums ‘emphasize the link with local history, local landscapes, natural resources, biotopes and agricultural practices’ (Borelli & Davis 2012, 34), regenerative farming practices and ecological parkland management systems can be understood in terms of their environmental value along with their historical contexts and current cultural meanings. Indeed, in ecomuseology, ‘an old oak tree, a coppiced woodland...or traditional breeds of livestock’ might be preserved as links to an historic past, interpreted for their contemporary social and cultural significance (Davis 2011, 5). The ancient oak in Hatfield Park under which Elizabeth I was reportedly sat when she learned of her coronation is now highlighted as a valuable habitat for local biodiversity with tangible links to the past (Hatfield Park 2026). Moreover, in contrast to traditional museums which rely on ‘out of context’ interpretation (Choi 2017, 70), the integration of the visitor into local natural and agricultural environments in situ within a landscape paradigm of contemporary sustainability and wellbeing are evidence of this theoretical discourse in practice. Holkham’s former ‘bygones museum’ which housed a collection of historic agricultural equipment (Hitchcock 2023, 609), has been replaced by their exhibit on historically-informed regenerative farming, climate change and biodiversity and actively links to its wider natural and cultural environment.

Key to mapping developments in estate landscapes onto principles of ecomuseology is the heightened degree to which these changes embed the estate within its surrounding socio-ecological environment. This thesis provided insight into the overwhelming role of the wider estate in facilitating repeat visits, particularly for local communities. This process of continual use is associated with an ‘emotional connection of ownership’ (Taylor, Rasen, and Lewney 2023, 397) essential to developing a ‘sense of place’ (Hawthorne *et al.* 2022, 1-2; Felder, 2021, 184) central to ecomuseology and underpins sustainable community development aims prioritised in modern heritage and museum theory and practice (Grenni *et al.* 2020, 411-412; Masterson *et*

al. 2017; Davis 2008, 233). Building on a correlation between exposure to nature in childhood and increased environmental awareness in adulthood (Measham 2007), outdoor activities which are immersive and active, such as those highlighted in the National Trust's '50 things to do before you're 11^{3/4}', for example, 'build a den' or 'go bird watching', are further associated with greater nature engagement as an adult (Kellstedt *et al.* 2024). Consequently, the focus on children and families in current landscape-focused visitor strategies has the potential to contribute to long-term ecological objectives by promoting environmental sensitivities within a population. Moreover, in light of the broader human health and wellbeing benefits provided by nature engagement and access (Järekkari *et al.* 2025; Geary *et al.* 2023; Pritchard *et al.* 2019), greater interest in the natural environment, facilitated by estate landscape-based childhood experiences might serve to create healthier and more sustainable local communities in the future which conforms to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals established in 2015 (United Nations 2026). The strategies which have been, and continue to be, developed to better engage with disadvantaged or historically excluded communities strengthen this potential. Osterley Park's partnership with a local cycling group for Muslim women and other women of colour (Eddy 2023, 810; Cycle Sisters n.d.), reflects the inclusive, community-orientated opportunities these landscapes can offer which contribute to healthier, more resilient communities – especially significant following the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bates & Partington 2022).

Critical to these changes and their meanings in visitor contexts is the process by which these developments have been community-driven, rather than expert-led. Susan Hopkinson (Burton Constable) referenced this shift in management, remarking that 'in museums and country houses, nobody would have ever thought of...what audiences wanted [before]. You would give them what they were having' (Hopkinson & Nassau 2023, 320). This research has demonstrated that turns toward the landscape for purposes of health-promoting, nature-based, outdoor leisure have been largely in response to public demand, with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and government lockdowns further clarifying the importance of these landscapes as local, inclusive, and accessible green space. In contrast to traditional modes of expert-led curation, these more community-focused forms of public engagement serve to construct meaning from the bottom-up, creating a 'dynamic relationship' which runs 'counter to the authorised heritage discourse' (Davis 2018, 1-2; Robertson 2012, 11). Therefore, in addition to the debates unfolding in public dialogue, competing heritage discourses are actively playing out within the contexts of the contemporary English estate itself. These discourses, authorised and alternative, are expressed through the house and collections, and their wider estate

landscapes, respectively. Yet, as a result of the primary significance and prioritisation of the landscape in current estate management and public engagement models, it is the latter which primarily expresses their contemporary use and meaning when these estates are perceived as a whole. Consequently, a diversity of estates across the country can be understood through a common set of locally-orientated, environmental, and social initiatives within their landscapes in contemporary contexts.

The history of England's country houses and landed estates has been one of continual adaptation to their social, political, and economic circumstances, from centres of aristocratic wealth and political power to their early twentieth-century decline and the subsequent resurgence of the country house and its collections as a heritage destination. The reconnection of the house to its wider estate and the ongoing transformation towards supporting environmental sustainability and human wellbeing is arguably a watershed in the role and socio-cultural significance of the landed estate and a chance to revitalise the holistic relationship of the house and its landscape. These issues, which the public engage with through the primary use of wider estate, reflect a bottom-up negotiation of use and social value which subverts the cultural meanings of the authorised heritage discourse expressed through the country house visit. In addition, the scale of the landed estate places them at the forefront of the social and environmental issues of contemporary England for which revolutions in land use are an essential factor. Consequently, these estates have the potential to enact change at requisite magnitudes to achieve real progress. Moreover, in light of the shared objectives across the spectrum of landed estates, concerted efforts in partnership, rather than in isolation, hold potential for seismic shifts in landscape use and significance. In 2025, then-Environment Secretary, Steve Reed, called on England's largest landowners to form a unified front in delivering environmental objectives, citing their cooperation as crucial in meeting national targets (Horton 2025). Nevertheless, economic considerations in delivering these environmental objectives are paramount. Despite the availability in some instances of private capital, the national government plays a defining role in supporting these transformations in landscape. Hence, while many estates must adhere to certain aims as registered charities, current and future government policy is central to incentivising broader change which is socially just and serves to promote public welfare. Indeed, Holkham's Conservation Manager, Jake Fiennes, has argued that 'greater access into the countryside' so that the 'public can connect with nature' must be integrated into agri-environmental subsidy schemes (Horton 2022). However, the emerging significance of these estates for purposes of human and ecological wellbeing is taking shape. In *The Polite Tourist* (1998, 209), Adrian Tinniswood remarked that 'to

the sixteenth century, [the country house] talked about power; to the eighteenth, taste; and to the twentieth, nostalgia for a world we never lost because we never owned it'. Perhaps for the twenty-first it will be their sustainable landscapes that will be evermore valuable to a world facing unprecedented environmental and social challenges.

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