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Heritage sites, value and wellbeing: learning from the COVID-19 pandemic in England

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 lockdown of society in 2020 deprived people of access to many heritage sites. This made the public uniquely aware of why they visited heritage sites and what they valued about the visits, once heritage sites reopened. In particular, regaining access framed visits in terms of personal agency and wellbeing. Notions of capability, social connections, ontological security, and trust – all important elements of wellbeing – were widely shared values. Heritage sites also offered distinct opportunities for combining hedonic (subjective) and eudaimonic (psychological) wellbeing effects. While heritage value cannot be reduced to wellbeing effects, we suggest that constructive awareness of how these effects may be generated can enhance the outcome of visits to heritage sites.

Introduction

On 23 March 2020, England went into its first lockdown to slow the spread of COVID-19. Strict limits were imposed on daily life with people ordered to only leave the house for essentials such as food, medicine, exercise or to care for a vulnerable person. All non-essential shops were closed and gatherings of more than two people were banned. Heritage sites were among the many organisations to close their doors, depriving people of access. Routine practices were disrupted as taken-for-granted activities, including the ability to visit sites, were put on hold. When lockdown was eased in June 2020, outdoor heritage sites were some of the first places to reopen, gradually followed by interiors over the summer months, before the imposition of a second, less harsh, national lockdown in November 2020. Summer to autumn 2020 was thus a period in which habitual practices were re-enabled, and public access to heritage sites was regained after a period of deprivation. Crucially, visits to sites during this opening up of society were framed by an explicit awareness of *what* was being regained and *why* such visits took place.

This extraordinary context lends visitor responses from this time particular interest. This paper is based on the proposition that in the rawness of routines and access having been disrupted and then regained, recognition of the value of heritage sites, especially use-value, was intensified, casting unique light on some of the essential characteristics and potentials of such sites. As one visitor put it,

> Lockdown made me realise just how important these national treasures are to our wellbeing. (Questionnaire: Corfe Castle, 02.08.20)

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Being formulated within this context, the responses of visitors not only articulate roles and values heritage fulfilled in the specific moment, but also underscore the long-term potentials of heritage sites to contribute to a range of aspects of wellbeing. Based on survey, interview and participant observation data collected by the project *Places of Joy: Heritage After Lockdown*, we discuss the articulation of heritage values that relate to how regaining access was used by visitors to support their mental health (either consciously or unconsciously). These values include notions of capability, social connections, ontological security, and trust. We argue that heritage sites offered distinct opportunities to combine hedonic (subjective) and eudaimonic (psychological) wellbeing effects.

Places of joy: heritage after lockdown

The last few years have seen explicit interest in the use of heritage sites for social benefit, including mental health (e.g. Power and Smyth 2016; Reilly, Nolan, and Monckton 2018; Pennington et al. 2019, Heritage Alliance 2020). The scale of societal challenges, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, has accelerated the need to understand this relationship better. To date, however, most work has either been very general or case study-based descriptions of uses of a specific place (e.g. various case studies in Heritage Alliance 2020). Moreover, more detailed analyses tend to be derived from targeted and/or mediated interventions for therapeutic purposes (e.g. Darvill et al. 2019; Everill, Bennett, and Burnell 2020; Nolan 2019; Innes et al. 2021). Although important and providing insightful indications of the effects of heritage site visits, by their very nature such mediated interventions differ substantially to the experience of the majority of visitors. The latter was the focus of *Places of Joy: Heritage After Lockdown*, which examined the complementary and sometimes contrasting ways that people identify the value of heritage sites in terms of wellbeing.

Wellbeing is both an individual and social construct. Individual conceptualisations and experiences of wellbeing are produced in and through wider social perceptions and practices (Sointu 2005) and are linked to social norms and values (De Feo et al. 2014). Wellbeing can be understood as 'how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole' (New Economics Foundation 2012, 6). Within this wide-ranging definition sit several different components of wellbeing, revealing a complex and multi-faceted notion. *Subjective wellbeing* is the commonly used measure of wellbeing, which is generally seen to comprise three elements – the presence of positive affect, low negative affect and life satisfaction (Martella and Sheldon 2019). These might be translated in everyday terms to happiness, enjoyment and pain avoidance (Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz 1999). This equates closely to *hedonic wellbeing* where the focus is on enjoyment and satisfaction. But while the more immediate 'hedonic' pleasure is important, positive psychological functioning, life satisfactions and rewards are attained through more intrinsic eudaimonic processes (Ryan and Deci 2001; New Economics Foundation 2008). Eudaimonia recognises that wellbeing and the fulfilment of psychological needs are realised through autonomy and control, a sense of efficacy and accomplishment, relatedness, and a sense of purposefulness and meaning, including learning new things (Ryff and Singer 2008; Waterman et al. 2010; Martella and Sheldon 2019). The difference is well illustrated by Filep's (2016) example of a visit to Auschwitz. With its emphasis on positive emotional gains and happiness, to talk about the hedonistic regards of a visit to a concentration camp would seem completely inappropriate, while assessing a visit in terms of eudaimonia with its focus on meaning, engagement and self-development as an essential part of wellbeing, would not be out of place. The combination of hedonia and eudaimonia are important for maximising wellbeing (Huta 2015).

Wellbeing is thus a process-based notion underpinned by individual and social practices. Visits to heritage sites offer one such set of practices. As a consequence of the COVID-19 lockdown and persistent public health messaging, widespread, explicit public awareness of wellbeing meant that visitors had a readiness to share reflections about the visit which provided a unique opportunity for data collection. Although our data was probably affected by this heightened awareness and possible COVID-19-related increase in wellbeing needs, which could question the relevance of the data

beyond its specific context, the physical characteristics and historical contexts of heritage sites were unaffected by the pandemic. Thus, the responses of a strikingly self-aware public both in terms of regaining access to place and attentiveness to wellbeing needs revealed in our interviews and in participant observation, expose deep-seated values attached to heritage sites that have clear general relevance.

Fieldwork was carried out at seven heritage destinations in the south of England representing different kinds of attractions along a spectrum from primarily green space to palace interiors: Stansted Park (Stansted Park Foundation) – an Edwardian stately home surrounded by parkland with a popular garden centre and café; Avebury (National Trust) – world heritage site Neolithic stone circle and prehistoric landscape; Mottisfont Abbey (National Trust) – an eighteenth century house and gardens built around a medieval priory; Kingston Lacy (National Trust) – a nineteenth century house and gardens, including a large collection of paintings and artefacts built on wealth from plantations and the Caribbean slave trade. The site also has a distinctive place in LGBTQ history as owner William John Bankes was exiled for homosexuality; Corfe Castle (National Trust) – a 1000 year old castle destroyed in the seventeenth century; Hampton Court (Historic Royal Places) – best known as the palace of Henry VIII; Tower of London (Historic Royal Palaces) – fortress, palace, prison and world heritage site. Sites reopened at different stages over the summer from June to the end of October 2020. They include free as well as pay-to-enter locations, with opportunities to join membership organisations. The extent to which we can generalise from the behaviours of members of heritage organisations to society at large is not considered here. We focus on visits to heritage sites as a particular form of practice.

Mixed methods data was collected at each site on at least three occasions at regular 3–4 week intervals, except at Historic Royal Palaces where COVID-related safety measures required online data collection only. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, taking a grounded theory approach in order to access heritage values expressed by participants. Socially distanced in-person data collection was carried out at sites by inviting participants to complete a questionnaire on paper or via a QR code before/after the visit. Participants were also asked if they were willing to be interviewed. Interviews were recorded on paper at time of fieldwork (social distancing prohibited sound recording), and subjected to content analysis. Participant observation was used to provide an additional layer of subjective insight and assist in interpretation of questionnaire and interview material. Identical questions were used for online and in-person surveys. Online participants were recruited via Historic Royal Palaces social media. We recognise that affective levels of response may be reduced if questionnaires are completed offsite but do not deem this sufficiently significant for the present analysis that our data cannot be combined together. Interviews and participant observation were not conducted online and therefore unavailable for Historic Royal Palaces. However, opportunity for open-ended response was included in the online questionnaire.

The questionnaire included sections on previous visits, motivations for visiting, emotional effects of the visit, perceived benefits of the visit, affordances (affective qualities) of sites, hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, and demographic information, as well as an open-ended response section (which asked: 'Is there anything else you would like to tell us about this place or how the experience of lockdown has affected your attitude to visiting heritage sites?'). This enabled identification of a range of values associated with the visits. The questionnaire was tested and refined before the start of data collection to ensure that it adequately captured visitor responses . Sections of the questionnaire were based on psychometric scales developed for assessing wellbeing, emotion and benefits of other environments (Naylor 1981; Van den Berg, Jorgensen, and Wilson 2014; Harmon-Jones 2016; ONS 2018) but adapted by the project to capture the specificity of heritage sites. We acknowledge the limitations of estimating wellbeing responses exclusively through self-reports, and do not make any inference about clinical diagnosis. Neither do we compare pre- and post-pandemic responses, nor our data with other 'non-heritage' locations; comparable pre-COVID data from heritage sites is unavailable and the research focussed on heritage sites. The total number of

questionnaire responses in the study is 781.[1] The total number of interviews is 328. Fifty-two percent of visitors were aged over 55 years (23% 55–64; 23% 65–74; 6% 75+ years), while 48% were 16–53 years old (18% 45–54; 16% 35–44; 10% 25–34; 4% 16–25). The age profile of participants is not representative of the population of the UK as a whole but is representative of visitors to each of the heritage sites included in the research. Women were over-represented in the sample (33% male; 66% female), reflecting greater willingness to participate in this kind of research (see Korpela et al. 2008). Eighty-nine percent of respondents identified as White British (compared to 86.0% of the population in the UK Census 2011); 4.8% was White Other and 1.4% was White Irish, with 0.9% being of Other Asian background. Ethnic diversity in our sample is not fully representative of all groups across the population but regional travel restrictions in place at time of research mean that this cannot be fully understood in terms of visitor choice; with the exception of Historic Royal Palaces, sites are located in a less ethnically diverse part of England. Given the self-selecting nature of our sample, we recognise the limitations of the data in extrapolating our findings to society at large. Further details of the sample can be found in Gallou et al. (forthcoming).

In this paper we focus primarily on visitor motivations, the perceived benefits of the visit, and indicators of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. In the following analysis, we concentrate on issues that are of importance to visitors, meaning that other aspects, such as potential contestation, are not considered here.

Visits to heritage sites and wellbeing values

In order to understand how the value and experience of heritage were articulated after lockdown, it is necessary to appreciate the social impacts of the disruption caused by COVID-19. The reopening of heritage sites took place in the context of wide-ranging and severe effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the UK population, including feelings of helplessness and lack of agency, social isolation, increases in anxiety, boredom, concerns over safety, and worry about the future (ONS 2020a, 2020b). However, some positive outcomes have also been reported, such as the ability to spend more time with family, engage in self-reflection and realignment of priorities (ONS 2020c). Our data reveal a series of ways in which visitors articulate the value of heritage sites in terms of these different aspects of wellbeing. Some of these are not necessarily unique to heritage sites but nonetheless emerge as important in visitors' responses and reflections. Others refer to the particular historicity and affordances of heritage sites and are thus specific to them.

Heritage visits and notions of capability

Capability as the ' . . . combinations of things a person is able to be or do . . . ' (Sen 1993, 30) is important to wellbeing since ' . . . functionings are seen as central to the *nature* of wellbeing . . . ' (Sen 1993, 36 emphasis in original). It becomes a central concern when society closes down and agency is taken away from people. Prohibitions on visiting sites during lockdown removed capability and the reopening of heritage became a means of restoring it. However, regaining access to heritage was not just related to the notion of regaining control over heritage spaces themselves, it was closely linked to a sense of regaining control over one's life. Thus, heritage experiences were not reified as 'heritage' and isolated from wider social concerns. Indeed, the early reopening of heritage sites quickly resulted in such places becoming emblems of post-lockdown freedom and an expression of control over one's action; the word 'freedom' emerges strongly in the free text responses in the questionnaire and in the interview data. The realisation of agency through access to place often had a profound emotional impact. Typical examples of the way in which this was expressed include:

Table 1. Visitor habits before and after lockdown. Percentage of visitors in each visit frequency category reporting more frequent visits after lockdown.

Categories of visit frequency before lockdown	Percentage of visitors in each visit frequency category reporting more frequent visits after lockdown
Less than once a year	48%
At least once a year	40%
At least 3 or 4 times a year	70%
At least once a month	31%

> This place is so important to me and my daughter ... we've been tightly shielding with my parents. Coming here gives me a sense of hope and freedom. (Interview: Mottisfont Abbey, 2.9.20)

> In lockdown I was more short-tempered and frustrated at the restrictions. As I can now visit National Trust places I have a lot of my freedom back. (Questionnaire: Corfe Castle, 6.9.20)

On release of lockdown, access to heritage sites was not unfettered. In order to improve COVID-security, heritage providers instituted booking systems to restrict visitor numbers; this was the case at all of the case study sites except Stansted Park and Avebury. At a time when control over one's own actions had been compromised through COVID-19 regulations, the suggestion that access might be restricted seemed to take control away again. Visitors who had, by definition, been successful in obtaining tickets, frequently expressed mixed feelings about the need to book a timed entry slot in advance. The consequent need to plan visits was frequently contrasted with pre-pandemic spontaneity and was explicitly linked to current limits placed on action, agency, and notions of freedom.

> It will never be the same stress-free back to normal until the spontaneity is restored - no timed slots, sitting on the laptop each Friday - and all areas being open, and being able to navigate at will, not one way round. (Questionnaire: Kingston Lacy, 17.7.20)

Such comments highlight the importance of capability as part of the experience of visits to heritage sites. Indeed, so important was the act of visiting that people made many more visits than they usually would, despite the booking systems (Table 1). We asked people to tell us how often they had visited heritage sites before lockdown and how many visits they had made after. The increase in visit frequency was notable across all pre-lockdown visit frequency categories but was particularly striking amongst visitors who visited heritage sites 3 or 4 times a year before the pandemic. This group reported a 70% increase in the frequency of visits post-lockdown. The apparently mundane act of visiting took on immediate meaning and value in and of itself Table 1.

It is noteworthy that, within the context of post-COVID reopening, notions of capability reported by visitors focussed primarily on the physical ability to access and move around sites, rather than regaining or reclaiming an encounter with the past. Lack of comment on the latter is striking; only two out of all questionnaire responses refer to it, even once interiors with collections had opened.

Capability is an element of wellbeing that may be facilitated by access to heritage sites, although it is not unique to visits to them. Nonetheless, responses indicate that this is highly valued, whereas capability in terms of intellectual and emotional engagements seem much less recognised by visitors. An opportunity for the sector exists to consider how a focus on capability adds to the widely recognised challenge of developing visitor experiences that offer empowerment through engagement.

Heritage visits and social connections

As soon as lockdown began to be eased, heritage sites became important social spaces. Pre-lockdown, the most common reason given for visiting heritage sites was to spend time with friends and family, with 42.4% of visitors citing this as a reason (DCMS 2019. Taking Part Survey Year 14:

England Adult Report (2018/19) – cited in Historic England 2020, 33). In our post-lockdown data this almost doubles to 83.5%. More than a quarter of respondents (27.3%) explicitly chose heritage sites as a place to reunite with friends and family after months of separation; sites became places of joy. The social value attached to sites was a clear response to the impact of lockdown on relational wellbeing (wellbeing through connection with others); at the start of data collection, just over a quarter of the UK population (26%) reported feeling lonely (ONS 2020b).

The choice of a heritage site as a place of reunification was in part driven by practical considerations. Open air sites were in the first wave of reopening and were among the limited options of 'safe' places to meet, alongside the availability of facilities (toilets and café), though these were not always open. Location also played an important role. As people were not allowed to stay overnight in each other's homes, they frequently travelled relatively long distances to meet halfway between their places of residence; 28.5% of our sample travelled more than 1 hour to visit a site.

> We have been to three National Trust properties this week. We met up with friends at each. We don't feel comfortable in the pub or restaurants, so coming out to meet people here is so important. (Interview: Mottisfont Abbey, 26.9.20)

However, the interview data reveals greater nuance to this choice. All interviewees were asked the question 'Why did you choose to come here [the site] rather than the park or the beach?', the latter two being representative of other public places widely used by people at the time. Answers to this question reveal five distinct (though not mutually exclusive) groups of visitors who used heritage in different ways to support relational wellbeing.

Group 1: Visits as reunification. For many people, the experience of physically meeting friends and family for the first time after an enforced period of separation was momentous and emotional. There was a distinct sense that reuniting constituted an important moment in a family/friendship group and in national 'pandemic history'. This was reflected in persistent use of the word 'we' to refer to a shared national experience as well as immediate kin/social groups. There was a sense of appropriateness of using heritage to make history in the present. As a result, sites developed contemporary social significance *because* of COVID-19, rather than solely for their pre-existing historical meanings. Thus the choice of location had often been carefully considered for its perceived aesthetic value and ability to enhance a long-desired moment, in the same way that people might choose an appropriate wedding venue. Indeed, 46.6% of participants stated that a motivation for visiting was 'To share my enjoyment of this place with someone else'. Importantly for visitors of all age groups, this backdrop also often formed part of a 'selfie culture' or reunion record to be posted on social media or curated, such that the place took on a central role in the narrative of the day.

In this case, people were not visiting primarily to engage with the past or the site history. Instead, heritage sites acted as a stage set or backdrop where their affordances were important in facilitating heightened emotional experiences and in creating a shared sense of the experience of place which reinforced ties between people. Thus, the visit nurtured a sense of connectedness. In this case, heritage acted primarily as a medium for intersubjectivity rather than for direct engagement. On one level this can be understood as a rather superficial response to heritage sites, but the visit nonetheless had deep emotional meaning as an act of reconstituting disrupted social relations.

Group 2: Visits for others. People in this group had little or no interest in heritage or in visiting the site but nonetheless derived a sense of wellbeing from helping others to visit. This included parents or grandparents with young children, people with elderly relatives, and friends or partners who gained pleasure from seeing others enjoy themselves. Here, relational wellbeing emerged from the intersubjective construction of self where heritage acted as a resource to facilitate such wellbeing effects.

> I think the effect of lockdown was far greater on my children (aged 5 and 2), not being able to get out and exercise/have a change of scene. So coming out to stimulate them has been very much missed. Being able to use/do things together is very important to manage their wellbeing. (Questionnaire: Corfe Castle, 18.7.20)

> My wife likes to come here for the flowers. I'm not so keen (sic) because I prefer industrial heritage sites . . . (Questionnaire: Mottisfont Abbey, 24.6.20)

Group 3: Visits to experience a sense of community. Belonging to a community is a crucial factor in defining and maintaining a positive sense of self (Baumeister and O'Leary 1995 in Goulding 1999) and is understood as a central element of relational wellbeing (Jetten et al. 2017). Many single visitors and couples visiting sites on their own indicated that they benefited from relational wellbeing effects by experiencing a sense of community. Having been on their own throughout lockdown, regaining access to heritage allowed them to be 'with' other people and to share an experience of place with others. Visits to heritage sites facilitated 'silent companionship' with other people with a shared interest, even if they didn't know them and did not communicate (Dobat et al. 2020). As one interviewee put it,

> It's nice to see people and be with them even if I'm here on my own. I can be in a large open space but I'm not alone. (Interview: Kingston Lacy, 17.7.20)

A sense of community was also experienced in terms of notions of shared values. Elsewhere it has been shown that visits to heritage sites elicit a sense of community through the perception that 'people who visit are like us and share our values', and that this generates a sense of social safety, comfort, and security linked to class (Smith 2006; Merriman 2016). In the context of the pandemic, this also took on an additional layer of being a community with shared attitudes to safety:

> I can trust people more not to come too close. They are like us. You know - responsible. (Interview: Kingston Lacy, 1.8.20)

This group of visitors identify themselves as a community of the virtuous; they are people who care about and abide by COVID-19 guidance.

Group 4: Visits as family tradition. Cultural traditions are, by definition, intersubjective practices since they are both expressed and transferred through social relations (Toren 1999). Traditions thus form a cultural context through which relational wellbeing may emerge. This group of visitors was composed primarily (but not exclusively) of inter-generational families for whom repeat visits to particular sites formed part of a tradition. Smith (2021) has observed that such visits make and remake familial identity by reproducing similar affective responses in children to that experienced by previous generations (also see Gable and Handler 2000). This also emerged in our data but with a heightened level of urgency and awareness in the context of the pandemic. Visitors reported that enforced separation from loved ones and awareness of their own mortality created a particularly urgent need to pass on their experiences of heritage.

Despite the emotional imperative to ensure the continuity of tradition, which was ostensibly linked to place, participants sometimes mistook one site for another suggesting that site specificity was of limited importance. For example, the father of two young children visiting Corfe Castle as part of a multigenerational family told us that his parents had taken him there when he was little. During lockdown the family had been reminiscing and had decided that they would take the children to Corfe as soon as possible after lockdown. In the course of the visit, the parents and grandparents took photos of the children 'at the same window' where they had taken a picture of the father, when he was a boy. Following the interview, concerned that our research should be accurate, they contacted the project to tell us that they had looked in the family photo album and realised that the castle window in the original photo was not Corfe, but probably a castle in Wales. These false memories suggest that the idea of place and what it represents may be more important than specific locations for facilitating relational wellbeing. Heritage sites that share particular qualities may have the potential to facilitate wellbeing in similar ways.

Group 5: Visits to feel connected with people who have died during the COVID-19 pandemic or before. These visitors came to feel close to their loved one. Often this was because they used to visit the site together and it had been a favourite place. There is already a well-developed practice of using heritage sites, such as National Trust properties, for such memory acts. The latter advertises this practice under the heading, 'In memory dedications at our places' (https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/in-memory-gifts, accessed April 2021). However, the ability to mourn and create personal memory statements was severely curtailed during the period, so people had to be more self-reliant in creating memory acts. These were not necessarily happy visits, though they were sometimes nostalgic. They were frequently expressed as intangible ways of memorialising the dead and obtaining comfort at a time when funerals or other commemorative gatherings were restricted and grieving was difficult. By virtue of emotional connection, a specific physical place was actively used by visitors to mediate the connection between the living and the dead.

The notion of relational wellbeing, as constructed through intersubjectivity, foregrounds a range of shared or public resources, including heritage, through which people make meanings. However, our data show that the values attached to heritage in the construction of relational wellbeing can vary. The five groups described above sit on a spectrum in terms of how heritage sites are valued as a social space. On one hand, people identify the value of heritage in only the most general sense as a location to facilitate social experiences. At this level the different sites in our study are almost interchangeable; what happens at one could equally happen at another. On the other hand, specific places are integral to emotional responses. In all cases, however, social networks and relations were created and confirmed.

Social isolation and loneliness is recognised as the most reliable predictor of mental health outcomes across the lifespan (Levula, Wilson, and Harré 2016). Unmediated visits to heritage sites offer a range of relational wellbeing experiences, stressing their potential for wellbeing outcomes. By further strengthening our understanding of sites as social spaces it may be possible to enhance the use value of heritage sites and maybe even widen participation.

Heritage visits and ontological security

The importance of visits to heritage sites as routine practices that anchor people's lives by providing order and continuity was frequently expressed by participants at all sites in terms of regaining access and a return to 'normal'. 80.5% of our sample were members of heritage organisations, many of whom viewed visits to sites as an important part of a regular pre-COVID routine. For these people, closure of heritage sites during lockdown destabilised the ability to engage in regular practices and hence potentially impacted their material and social 'existential anchorings of reality' (Giddens 1991, 38). Moreover, this disruption was not just recognised by regular visitors but also by infrequent users, to the extent that it even affected the idea of visiting.

> . . . I have always loved NT houses and especially gardens . . . . Although I may not necessarily have visited any if lockdown hadn't happened. The knowledge that I 'couldn't' did make life a little less joyous. (Questionnaire: Mottisfont Abbey, 6.8.20)

The sense of normality and the institution of order valued and regained through visits appear not to be about linking self to the past, representing or confirming world views (contra Smith 2021), but about the sheer act of visiting.

In addition to the widespread sense of a return to order embedded in the concept of normality, notions of ontological security were also expressed in relation to the unique temporal characteristics of heritage sites. Recent work investigating the use of prehistoric landscapes and the built historic environment for wellbeing purposes suggests that heritage offers a special quality of contemplation that can promote feelings of ontological security fundamental to wellbeing (Grenville 2007; Nolan 2019). Heritage enables individuals to situate themselves in the longue durée, reflect on mortality, and find meaning in the continuity between past and present (Lipe

1984; Eriksen 2007; Nolan 2019). This can provide people with a buffer against stresses and strains in life (Morse et al. 2020), which were particularly acute during the pandemic; at time of data gathering, 63% of people were worried about the future (ONS 2020b). In our data, the opportunity to situate the self in deep time created a sense of perspective on the current pandemic for some people. This group of visitors experienced a sense of comfort and belonging in reflecting that people in the past had been through and overcome various forms of crisis. These responses were particularly frequent at Avebury and Corfe Castle; the more temporally distant the site, the greater the perceived sense of stability and permanence, and the more often comments relating to ontological security were expressed. Time depth was thus a powerful factor in facilitating this aspect of wellbeing.

> The stones speak to me. They give me a sense of belonging in a way that I don't feel if I look at a piece of porcelain [in a museum]. It's about a sense of mortality. That there's a continuum and I am part of a bigger picture. It makes me feel better. (Questionnaire: Avebury, 30.7.20).

It seems that people were able to project present feelings and consequences of the pandemic crisis into an imagined past without the constraints of historical knowledge. In this sense, the distant past may be used to construct a sense of ontological security by providing a story of long-term continuity. Furthermore, the more distant the past, the more space there was for imaginative engagement rather than following an authoritative script, and thus potentially more malleable in terms of fulfiling wellbeing needs. Yet, the tangibility of the past simultaneously means it is a place that has a presence, is known and can be revisited. Heritage sites thus affect ontological security through two dimensions: their ability to locate the self as part of a historical narrative reaching from the past into the future, and their presence as familiar sites that enable relationships to place. These unique values of heritage not only have potential to play a vital role in creating a sense of stability in an uncertain world but, even more importantly, they ought to help in dealing with future instability, such as the impact of climate change.

Heritage visits and trust

Trust is an important social concept and the existence of trust (or not) has a substantial impact on wellbeing (Helliwell and Wang 2011). Trust was an important value behind visitors' decisions to visit. Visitor responses show that heritage organisations were trusted to 'do things properly' and to put appropriate COVID-secure measures in place, such as handwashing facilities and ensuring social distancing. This 'brand trust' was sometimes allied to notions of familiarity and reliability inasmuch as visitors chose to visit a site because they had been there before and knew what it was like. This created wellbeing by promoting a sense of safety and enabling participants to develop confidence to navigate the threat posed by the pandemic.

Throughout the period of the research, safety was a major concern for the majority of participants. Only 37% of the UK population felt safe or very safe outside their home in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (ONS 2020a). In this context, heritage sites were perceived as oases of safety in an otherwise threatening outside world; in our data 85% of visitors felt secure or very secure at heritage sites. Participants often believed that heritage sites were safer than other public places; 41.4% of participants cited as a reason for visiting that they are a 'managed safe space', and 33.2% considered that 'social distancing is easier here than elsewhere'. Furthermore, many indicated that they felt safer visiting heritage sites than shops, pubs or restaurants (which opened gradually throughout the summer and autumn). Such was the trust placed in heritage providers that in interview, many of these same people expressed a desire to purchase items in the site gift shop and café, which on an objective level followed the same COVID-19 guidelines as other non-heritage outlets.

For many, re-entering society was a complex experience that also involved developing trust in the outside world. Visits to heritage sites acted as stepping stones between an enforced period at

home and gradually re-entering society. For these people heritage visits played an important emotional role:

> . . . We were afraid to go out for the first time and to come here but [the visit] has given us confidence in going out . . . (Questionnaire: Mottisfont Abbey, 24.6.20).

Strikingly, in addition to the obvious steps taken by heritage providers to ensure the safety of visitors such as one-way systems, the unique time depth offered by heritage sites was used by visitors to envision that they were stepping outside a COVID present. This may relate to a wider notion of the past as a safe place, as noted by Lowenthal (2015), who suggests that the past is 'safer' than the future and the present because it is perceived as fixed, known, and thus reliable. In the context of COVID-19, heritage sites facilitate a link between time and space such that safety slides into escapism; almost a third of participants (32.4%) explicitly identify a motive for visiting as 'To escape from the worry and boredom of COVID-19'. This rises to 45.8% for visitors for whom visits were extremely important before the pandemic, where memories of the experience of previous visits helped to generate the perception of safety.

> I feel more appreciative than pre-lockdown, being able to switch off and enjoy the tranquillity. There are so many worries in normal life at the moment and we are constantly reminded of the impact of COVID. This visit is a total break from that, to be able to sit in such ancient surroundings with peregrines circling. (Questionnaire: Corfe Castle, 18.7.20)

Although many visitors recognised trust and safety as important qualities of heritage sites, overt reminders of COVID-19 through signage or taped off areas broke the sense of a pre-COVID space. Thus, paradoxically, reminders of pandemic restrictions were sometimes unwelcome, induced stress, and compromised trust and safety.

> Visiting at time of COVID found it very heavy. Not enjoyable at all and Hampton Court is my most enjoyable place to visit. Will not return till after COVID lifted. (Questionnaire: Hampton Court, 3.8.20)

Our data reveal a deep trust in cultural institutions. In this specific case it was expressed through notions of safety but the longer-term challenge is how such notions of trust may transfer to other aspects of the interactions between visitors and site managers. Traditionally within heritage studies we have cast that relationship in terms of Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006), but it is useful to consider how trust can be developed in a manner that does not simply maintain this asymmetrical relationship but becomes an empowering dynamic. How, for instance, within the postcolonial debate can heritage sites maintain trust in their presentations and interpretations? Trust, and the ability to maintain it, is both central to wellbeing and a core element of our socio-political landscape, and, therefore, of great importance to the heritage sector.

Translating heritage site visitor values to wellbeing outcomes

The responses by visitors discussed above reveal the perceived needs that visits to heritage sites can satisfy. In order to further understand the ways in which visitors use heritage sites in support of wellbeing it is useful to employ the concepts of *hedonic* (subjective) and *eudaimonic* (psychological) wellbeing.

Hedonic wellbeing

Our data indicate that the visits had a statistically significant impact on increasing happiness and reducing anxiety (Gallou et al. forthcoming). Thus heritage sites have potential to affect hedonic (subjective) wellbeing. A suite of values and practices associated with heritage lie behind these results. In common with our findings, other studies have shown that visits to heritage sites offer opportunities for improvements to subjective wellbeing by engaging in physical activity, connecting

with others, engaging the senses, or even just having a coffee (see Fujiwara, Cornwall, and Dolan 2014; Reilly, Nolan, and Monckton 2018; Historic England 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these benefits may be extended to opportunities to physically and psychologically escape from the stressors of household confinement, improving social capital, and developing a sense of connection with the world outside the home (see Samuelsson et al. 2020). The ways in which hedonia is experienced varies according to site, and subjective wellbeing benefits are not exclusive to heritage sites.

Eudaimonic wellbeing

Many of the values of heritage articulated by participants are eudaimonic in nature: capability, relational wellbeing, ontological security, and trust each contribute to fulfilment of psychological needs. Notable by omission from these visitor values is learning. Although learning about the past is a value often associated with heritage visits, our data are striking in the lack of importance given to this at most sites; this lack of desire to learn has been observed at heritage sites prior to COVID-19 (Smith 2006, 2021). Notable exceptions in our data are Historic Royal Palaces and Corfe Castle, both places where visits focus on architecture or interiors and where people explicitly recognise historicity as a quality (Table 2); our data show a statistically significant difference between sites in the number of people citing 'To learn about history' as a reason to visit (Kruskal-Wallis H = 84.10; Sig. = 0.00).

Our interview responses suggest that formal modes of learning are linked to public recognition of a site as heritage. Interviewees frequently made a clear equation between buildings as 'heritage', distinguishing this from perceived 'non-heritage' outside spaces, such as landscapes or gardens.

> I used to always go to National Trust houses but now they are closed I'm discovering the gardens . . . They aren't really heritage though, are they. (Interview: Mottisfont Abbey, 26.9.20)

However, informal learning also takes place in heritage sites, and often exactly through those spaces considered 'non-heritage'. This expresses itself, for example, through a recognition of historical aesthetics or appreciation of garden designs. In this sense people engaged with learning without having to do the intellectually 'hard work' of formal learning, which for many visitors stands in opposition to enjoyment. People frequently remarked on how surprised they were at how much they gained from their visit even without the usual access to houses, museums or other 'traditional' interpretive heritage attractions. This suggests that for these visitors, reduced access to signage, information, and interpretation was not necessarily detrimental to the overall experience of the visit.

Irrespective of whether or not visitors were aware of the opportunity to learn about the past, eudaimonic experiences were widespread. Most importantly, they were not only experienced at sites where learning formed part of a reason to visit (i.e. an expectation confirmed by the experience), but there were strong eudaimonic effects at all sites (Figure 1), with Stansted Park a possible exception. This effect is, for example, documented by the frequency of visitors saying that 'they can explore'.

Table 2. Number and percentage of participants citing 'to learn about history' as a reason for visiting heritage sites (*Hampton Court and Tower of London). Kruskal-Wallis H = 84.10; Sig. = **0.00.**

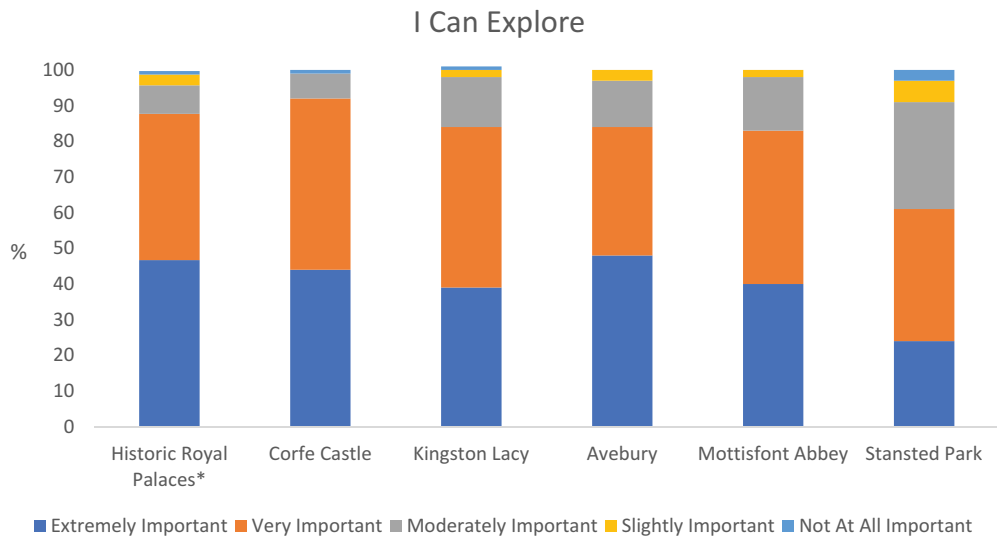| Site	Total number of visitor responses at each site	Number of participants citing 'To Learn About History' as a reason for visiting	Percentage of participants citing 'To Learn About History' as a reason for visiting
Historic Royal Palaces*	73	43	58.9%
Corfe Castle	161	92	57.1%
Avebury	97	27	27.8%
Kingston Lacy	183	49	26.8%
Mottisfont Abbey	200	32	16%
Stansted Park	67	2	3%
	781	245	

Figure 1. Importance to visitors of 'I Can Explore' as an example of eudaimonic experience (*Hampton Court and Tower of London).

Interview and participant observation data supplement this, showing informal learning through appreciating and noting features. Visitors used expressions such as: 'I never realised that . . . ', or 'It's so interesting that . . . '. Visitors therefore add value to their experience through wellbeing effects that they do not necessarily anticipate.

> More interested in exploring now. The stories are the most interesting part of visiting and using your imagination. (Questionnaire: Corfe Castle, 6.9.20)

Stansted Park provides interesting insights into the importance of the perception of places as heritage sites. Participant observation and interviews revealed that visitors came primarily for the café and garden centre, and visitor recognition of being in a heritage environment was much lower than elsewhere.

> I'd like to help you but I haven't been to any historic places recently. (Interview: in walled garden at Stansted Park, 26.8.20)

Revealingly, both hedonic and eudaimonic measures of wellbeing were lowest at Stansted Park. This suggests that the sheer notion of being at a 'heritage site' creates value and that this may relate to the quality of place, including aesthetics and notions of time.

Reflections on hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing may be useful to the heritage sector in considering the different outcomes enabled by the potentials and affordances of each heritage site, and how the sector can use these to engage the public. For instance, the heritage value of outside spaces could be further explored, and the overlap between the value of heritage sites and green spaces better placed in dialogue; more detailed research on the qualities of space is an area for future investigation. It would also be of value to more explicitly utilise the gradient between formal and informal learning in order to enhance the eudaimonic effects of visits. This may mean providing different forms and amounts of signage and interpretive information, perhaps even deliberately leaving some areas without interpretation, with the understanding that visitors appreciate opportunities for explorative learning which may produce important deep nurturing effects.

It is important to recognise that the majority of visitors pursue elements of hedonia and eudaimonia simultaneously, even if to different degrees. The implications of the overlap and

interconnectedness between these two qualities are especially intriguing when arising from a site 'visit', as such visits are planned activities and thus a performed experience during which pleasure and deeper nourishment may interweave. In other contexts, connections between hedonic and eudaimonic effects have been shown to lead to higher life satisfaction than any specific path to happiness or pursuing no path at all (Peterson, Park, and Seligman 2005). Heritage sites may be particularly strong in their ability to entwine these effects.

Conclusion

Although heritage is widely understood as a common good, over recent decades the sector has become increasingly concerned with having to account for itself and the value of heritage to society. From being taken for granted as something that was of intrinsic value, institutional statements about heritage value have increasingly been framed as a defence of the important use-value of heritage. In this process attention has moved away from inherent qualities, such as beauty, to focus on how heritage may contribute to various issues within contemporary society. Questions about inclusion, involvement, outreach, contestation, public value, and more recently wellbeing have become concerns of the heritage sector and with that has come a need for better data about these kinds of relationships. The data discussed in this paper fits within this need for more insights.

The material collected as part of *Places of Joy: Heritage After Lockdown* is unique in that it was collected during a very particular time when people had been deprived of, and then regained, access to heritage sites. This, we argue, made the visiting public uniquely aware of, and reflexive about, why they visited heritage sites and what they valued about the visits. Respondents frequently recognised a change in their attitudes to heritage sites after lockdown and, although the extent to which this is a long-term shift remains to be seen, some visitors articulated a desire for permanent change.

> . . . [we] need to continue [to visit] to manage our wellbeing rather than go back to the 'norm' at pre-shutdown. (Questionnaire: Corfe Castle, 18.07.2020)

While permanent loss or destruction can become a formative aspect of cultural heritage value (Rico 2020), the temporary removal of access to heritage during the COVID-19 pandemic may have reorientated perceptions of the value of heritage and placed it in the frame of personal agency and wellbeing.

A consistent trend in visitor responses aligns the perceived value of heritage with fundamental aspects of psychological wellbeing, including capability, social connections, ontological security, and trust. These provide a suite of dimensions which the sector can use to tap into the potential of visits for wellbeing. Furthermore, heritage sites offer opportunities for experiencing a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing effects that visitors do not always anticipate. It may be helpful for heritage providers to explore this and place their aims and activities within such a framework. Heritage sites offer important opportunities for wellbeing because they provide an unusual co-location of a wide range of wellbeing values and effects. They thus have relevance beyond themselves.

Note

1. An additional 47 responses from 42 non-case study sites were submitted online. They are excluded from this analysis.

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