

## **The English Country House and the Politics of Purpose**

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**Summary:** This essay examines the role of the country house as a public asset. The UK's historic houses landscape is varied and public/private ownership models offer different opportunities. By considering the purpose of a public country house, the essay explores how different ownership models can engage different publics. The paper concludes that, publics seeking a family home will find a more authentic experience by visiting Historic Houses member places.

This short paper approaches the tumultuous shifts in the position of the English country house as a heritage asset in the 20th and 21st centuries through the lens of the politics of purpose.

At the start, it is worth outlining some of the historical contexts– at the highest level - that have occurred since the Gowers Report, and where we find ourselves today in 2025. Although much of the oxygen surrounding the country house as a heritage asset continues to be taken up by one exhibition at the V&A 50 years ago, we would suggest - that despite the losses of some significant houses - it is survival and adaptation, rather than destruction is a better characterisation of the post-war country house. So, to put our remarks in context, we think it worth remembering that:

- We are very much past the era of increasing public acquisition of English country houses and their collections. Wentworth Woodhouse excepted, the sector is unlikely to see or expecting, a significant new stream of traditional country houses to enter the public domain. Rather, we should reflect on the fact that we are long into the era of focusing upon care and increasing public accessibility of the large number of 'saved' and surviving highly significant country houses of different historical periods.
- The model for visiting state rooms and historic interiors of country house interiors has barely changed since the Second World War; nor largely has the demographic makeup of audiences to country house interiors changed significantly. And, outside Christmas offers and other seasonal programming, significant visitor growth in this area has centred on the outdoors.
- Most innovation has happened in privately owned country houses – particularly in the inclusion of contemporary art interventions and creation of contemporary gardens and landscape design – where the sense of permission, personal agency, and the ability to shift and respond, feels far more tangible than within larger heritage organisations.

In that context then we need to ask. 'What is the purpose of the country house?' And more specifically, 'what is the public purpose of the country house?' How might this purpose determine the trajectories of country houses with different ownership structures? Do these different ownership structures confer different responsibilities and different obligations?

This question of purpose has emerged as a key organising principle to a range of research activities we have conducted during our two-year British Academy Innovation Fellowship ('Private spaces for public benefit' carried out in 2022-4). For the National Trust, the question of purpose has been enshrined in our founding documents for well over a century. The National Trust Act of 1907 states:

*"And whereas the Association was incorporated for the purposes of the benefit of promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest and as regards lands for the preservation (so far as practicable) of their natural aspect features and animal and plant life"*

It worth noting the words 'for the purposes of promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation'. The concept of promotion involves knowledge generation, supporting the generation of understanding, equitable interpretation and participation. We believe that to promote permanent preservation it is necessary to preach to more than just the converted. We have also sought to explore, what for the 'benefit of the nation' might mean today (nearly a century on when both demographics and societal norms are so radically different), and what changes might need to be made within National Trust owned country houses to ensure that we maximise the wider public benefit of our sites for the nations we serve.

There are inevitably, pressing obligations to audiences to increase relevance and particular obligations to stakeholders, and legal frameworks that are incumbent on what we have called the 'public country house'. We define the public country house as 'A once privately owned country house built for private enjoyment, now in the ownership of public bodies and charities established for national public benefit'.<sup>i</sup> The concept of the 'public country house', we contend, provides a way to reconceptualise this heritage asset, enabling new opportunities to expand the range of histories told in these locations, and ways they connect with audience needs.

This work fits closely with the NT New strategy launched in January 2025, which focuses on 'Restoring Nature', 'Ending unequal access to nature history, beauty' and 'Inspiring people to care and act', now and in the future. Our research undertaken as part the British Academy innovation Fellowship, has helped the National Trust think harder about how we can increase physical and intellectual access into country houses. This involves thinking differently about the core narrative of place, providing foundational interpretation that addresses whole histories of a site, providing an inclusive welcome, the provision of seating within showrooms, exploring co-curation and opportunities for audiences to discover on their terms. This is because the National Trust's houses and interiors belong to us all, not only those of us who already cherish them, and ultimately their purpose is to be enjoyed, used and useful to people in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them. For museums like the V&A, this may seem like a given, but for many public country houses, where the interpretative orthodoxy has often been to eschew tools such as object labels, such a practical and cultural shift can be seismic.

Most significantly, the idea of the public country house catalyses a conversation about purpose – should heritage organisations and museums act as custodians of the material past fixed at a particular moment in time, or, should they function as champions for a wider shared understanding of our national past, and use their material and historical assets as a means of achieving this? Or to put it another way, is preservation in the letter or the spirit? And, do we value heritage interiors only for their unchanging stasis or for their significance and relevance to us now?

We believe that the heritage sector can work harder to share these extraordinary historic interiors with even more people, create the conditions to tell deeper and richer narratives of their histories and connect with an even wider range of contemporary audiences. To do this, we need to find new ways to champion the role of the country house as a site for public history in all its forms based on factual evidence. Put simply, the people these places need to matter most, should be all our audiences (present and potential), now and in the future. Without this shift to a broader audience focused lens, we risk creating an ever-widening 'relevance gap' between the needs of the nation at large and the ongoing preservation of these national heritage assets.

There has been a remarkable flowering of country house scholarship in the past twenty years, which means we now know more than ever about the past lives of country houses. In our research, we've sought to use this scholarship –

both granular and expansive – to look forward. And asks what might the public country house become?

How we address the plurality of history is not a recent concern, as David Canadine, for example, noted the trend for a growing awareness of the complexity and significance of the country house in manifold ways.

We see this plurality as an enormous opportunity. We see additions to our national narratives, where others may see subtractions or loss. We see the opportunity to put different ideas and interpretations in dialogue, with the ambition of deepening engagement, understanding and, perhaps, even using heritage spaces to decrease societal polarisation in the context of the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ version of UK history.

If this is the ambition, what might this mean for the ways in which we curate the public country house? Our research examined models of innovation and practice at country houses in North American and Europe including: Het Loo Apeldoorn, Netherlands; Rembrandts House, Amsterdam Netherlands; Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris, France; Via Venaria, Turin, Italy; Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, Charlottesville, VA, USA; James Madison’s Montpelier, VA, USA; Heurich House, Washington, D.C. USA. And, in the UK alongside innovative work at many National Trust houses, other public and private country houses including Harewood House, Leeds; Wentworth Woodhouse, Rotherham; Auckland Castle, Bishop Auckland; Hampton Court Palace, London; Waddesdon, Aylesbury.

What emerged were that there are some key components critical to rethinking the audience appeal and potential reach of the public country house as a heritage asset. These included: i) the application of broad, deep and truthful histories of place ii) a determination to clarify the single core narrative for each house as linked to the understanding of the relevant associated collections iii) the recognition of interpretation (both person and self-led) as a craft iv) An audience focused mindset (e.g. self-led spaces where audiences can explore and discover their interests for themselves and resources which meet core and basic audience needs – including interpretation and seating).

Over the past year many of these components have been applied to a programme conceived for a group of internationally significant National Trust houses (under the banner ‘Discovery Houses’), where they are already starting

It to see significant impact on audience engagement with support from staff and volunteers. This approach to rethinking the public country house is not radical, but evolutionary, and research will continue to play an important part. In turn, it will also need to continue to adapt to audience needs to include co-curation and partnership models, alongside opportunities for audience participation in various forms.

We wanted to conclude with a brief reflection on the ways in which changing conceptions of the public purpose and public benefit of the country house surfaces within the world of politics. We are limiting ourselves to those moments where attention to country house is recognised within the formal politics of the Palace of Westminster. Searching the phrase country house in Hansard gives us a starting point. There are a few noticeable peaks of interest in the Commons and the Lords, the most apparent being the 1974 debates on the Wealth Tax and Historic Houses, and the 2004 debate on the so-called 'country house clause' within the planning policy guidance. Clearly this kind of keyword analysis is a relatively blunt tool for nuanced historical enquiry.

Instead, by looking across the ebb and flow of commentary surrounding the country house as a heritage offer and the National Trust it is possible to draw out some of the polarities around which the purpose of the public country house has coalesced. These can be best outlined as i) artistic value vs amenity value (asking the question for example, do these sites provide value for what they represent or for the way people experience and use them?); ii) our Island story vs Britain in the world (e.g. how should we tell the stories of wealth generation and the creation of built heritage in the context of colonisation and global connectivity?); iii) the unity of the country house vs the fragment (e.g. To what extent are country houses and collections indivisible and should objects only be in service of their last owner's memory).

We do not seek to argue that public ownership is better than private ownership. It is good news for visitors that there exists a range of ownership models. Those seeking the family home experience can more authentically experience this through member properties of Historic Houses as essentially private spaces open to the public. What we do believe, is that these different ownership models necessitate different sets of duties to different stakeholders, and that public country houses should be asking different types of questions.

In the context of the Public Country House, these questions help us to

appreciate the complexity of this heritage asset as a cultural construct; both at the crossroads of issues of social class, aesthetics and national identity and as amalgams of a public museums, private material biographies, exemplary architectural monuments. Each country house is, of course, utterly unique and in each case, their public value might be seen as dependent on an assessment of these three questions, and relevance of these cultural components to contemporary audiences, now and in the future.